In defence of MARXISM

Issue 52

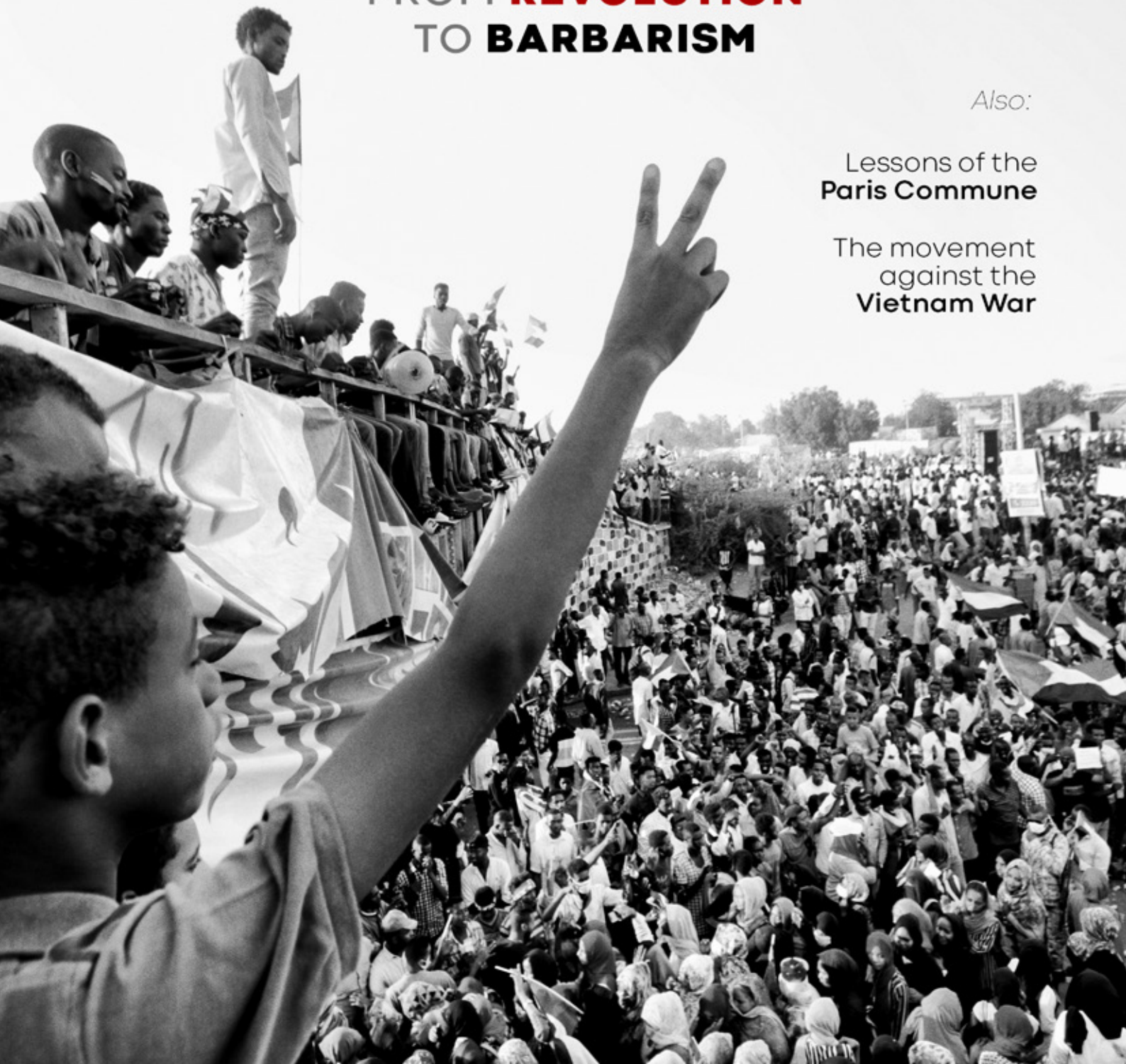
SUDAN

FROM REVOLUTION TO BARBARISM

Also:

Lessons of the **Paris Commune**

The movement against the **Vietnam War**



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SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM

Editorial Board

A hundred years ago, in the midst of the First World War, an anonymous pamphlet under the pen-name 'Junius' appeared in Zurich and rapidly began to circulate throughout the international workers' movement. This pamphlet had in fact been written from inside a German prison cell by Rosa Luxemburg. In it, she wrote:

> "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism."

This bold prediction, which she attributed to Friedrich Engels, has become one of the most widely recognised slogans of the Marxist movement: 'socialism or barbarism'.

These words have retained all their force today. They perfectly capture the period in which we live: a social system in an advanced state of decay; a degenerate ruling class that is incapable of addressing the problems of humanity; and a life-or-death struggle on the part of the oppressed to throw off the old order, in which the working class must either emerge victorious, or face ruin.

It is this reality that has been so starkly illustrated in Sudan today, and to which the present issue of *In Defence of Marxism* is devoted.

RISE AND FALL

Contrary to the once common liberal idea, history is not a continuous and gradual ascent along the high road of human progress. History knows a descending curve as well as an ascending one, great leaps forward and dramatic collapses.

Visit the majestic but desolate ruins of the great Mayan cities, or stand atop the remains of Hadrian's wall – built to establish the outer limit of the Roman Empire – and you will catch a glimpse of the great dialectical law of history: 'All that exists deserves to perish'.

But it is not enough simply to observe the fact that civilisations have come and gone before our own; it is necessary to understand why. For hundreds of years historians and philosophers have puzzled over this question. Indeed, the BBC has recently released a series called 'Civilisations: Rise and Fall' on precisely this subject, dealing with the collapse of Rome, Ptolemaic Egypt, the Aztec Empire, and Japan's Tokugawa Shogunate.

To say nothing of the content of this series (and the less said about it the better), what is most striking is the fact that the parallels with today are so openly acknowledged. Take one review in *The Guardian*, for example, which is titled: 'TV that will make you despair for our own plummeting society'.

The decline and collapse of civilisations is often explained away by reference to bad leadership, such as incompetent or insane emperors, or to external causes like natural disasters and plagues. While these play a role, the irreversible decline of an entire civilisation cannot be explained simply by the errors of individuals. Such an explanation only raises the question: 'Why did their leaders keep making mistakes?' – a question many ask about our own rulers today.

Karl Marx discovered the fundamental process which ultimately determines the rise and fall of civilisations, and set it out in a few brief but brilliant strokes in his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, the same year as Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Applying a scientific approach, Marx identified that every social formation arises on a material foundation: not just environmental conditions, but a definite set of relations between human beings, through which they produce the necessities of life in accordance with the level of technology already acquired.

For a time, the spread of these relations of production, and of the entire social, political and ideological order that arises on this material foundation, greatly accelerates the development of the means of production, science and technique: in short what are referred to as the 'productive forces'. And as the productive forces develop, they in turn reinforce the rising order, which sweeps everything before it.

History is full of examples of this phenomenon: the spread of agriculture during the Neolithic Revolution; the emergence of states and class society during the Bronze Age; the rise of the slave system, of ancient Europe and the Mediterranean; the 'medieval boom', which followed the consolidation of feudalism; and of course, the unstoppable rise of modern industrial capitalism. And this is by no means an exhaustive list.

But all things eventually turn into their opposite. As Marx explains, the productive forces that have been developed under the existing order become too powerful, too broad for the narrow confines of the existing relations of production and exchange.

In such periods, the maintenance of the old relations becomes an increasingly painful fetter on further development. Meanwhile, what economic development does take place leads not to a strengthening of the existing order but undermines it, producing crises, wars and revolutions.

The Roman slave economy decayed, and it was out of that decay that feudalism eventually emerged. Likewise feudalism thrived in Europe for centuries, only to enter into its own period of decline, in which the foundations of capitalism were laid. Thus, within the rise of every social system are the seeds of its eventual decay, and every decline contains the seeds of future progress, however remote that may appear.

IMPERIALISM

But what of capitalism? Given the fact that the world economy has grown many times over the last century, in what sense can we speak of the decline of the capitalist system today? The answer lies in the nature of imperialism, described by Lenin in his book, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in the same year that Luxemburg's pamphlet was published.

Imperialism is not simply one nation dominating the other, as is commonly understood by the term; it is a stage in the development of the world capitalist system, one in which capitalist relations have turned into their opposite.

So-called 'free competition' between capitalist firms has been replaced with the domination of the market by a series of giant banks and monopolies, which are indissolubly tied to the state. This applies just as much to countries where the role of the state is openly acknowledged, such as China, as it does to the USA, supposedly the home of 'free enterprise'.

The rise of planning within monopolies does not do away with the anarchy of the market; it exacerbates it, leading to ever deeper crises. At the same time, concepts

Rosa Luxemburg

Opposite: "Death to World Imperialism" (1920), Dmitri Moor (David King)

such as the 'creative destruction' and 'invisible hand' of the market have been replaced in practice by companies that are 'too big to fail', receiving bailouts, subsidies and lucrative state contracts, all funded by eye-watering levels of public debt.

Consequently, the capitalist class itself has become utterly parasitic. What development that does take place is largely dependent on the state, and carried out not by the bosses but by an army of wage workers. Rather than being strengthened by such development, the ruling class only becomes more redundant.

This can most clearly be seen in the old imperialist powers of Europe, where the ruling class has presided over decades of economic stagnation, deindustrialisation and crumbling infrastructure. But the signs of capitalist decay can be seen everywhere, not least in the indescribable levels of inequality.

In truth, never in history has there been a ruling class that is so parasitic, so detached from reality, and so ripe for overthrow.

Naturally this is reflected in the intellectual, moral, and even psychological degeneracy of the ruling class. This is epitomised by the banker-sex trafficker, Jeffrey Epstein, whose seedy network of 'clients' encompassed a large part of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the Western world. And that is only the tip of the iceberg.

The domination of the world by imperialism also brings the scourge of war and genocide on an unprecedented scale. In this sense, the highest level of civilisation yet achieved by humanity necessarily produces its opposite: barbarism.

This has been the case throughout the history of modern, capitalist imperialism. At the dawn of the imperialist era, the Berlin Conference of 1884 set down the infamous doctrine of *terra nullius* – 'nobody's land' – under which states were destroyed and populations wiped out in order to clear territory for the European imperialist powers.

Driven by the insatiable hunger of the monopolies for resources, markets and fields for investment, the ceaseless struggle of the most powerful capitalist states to carve up the globe led to the carnage of two world wars, which together claimed the lives of more than 100 million people.

And even during the golden age of the so-called '*Pax Americana*', the world witnessed a war of extermination waged by US imperialism against the people of Vietnam, the barbarity of which was summed up in the phrase of one American general: "We're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age".

Today, we have no shortage of examples of the barbarism fostered and spread by imperialism. In the horror inflicted on the people of Gaza, of Darfur and of eastern Congo, we clearly see the profound truth of Luxemburg's warning:

> "The victory of imperialism is the annihilation of civilisation".

And if capitalism is allowed to continue destroying the environment, then it may be confirmed in the most complete and literal sense imaginable.

CLASS STRUGGLE

Such is the horror produced by the crisis of capitalism today, many people have lost all belief that it is possible to make any rational sense of the world. This in turn has fuelled a rising interest in religion and conspiracy theories. Many even speak of the end of the world, whether due to some rogue AI, nuclear war, or any number of causes.

This apocalyptic dread is not new; it was common in the waning days of feudalism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But that was not the end of the world, only the death of an obsolete order.

In such periods, progress means escape from the wreckage of a sinking system, and the establishment of a new order, based on fundamentally different relations.

This clearing of old defunct relations and the unleashing of mankind's productive forces is the essence of social revolution. But revolutions are not carried out by the productive forces themselves, nor by 'humanity' or 'history' in the abstract. They are carried out by living human beings, divided into classes with opposing interests.

Marx noted that humanity only sets itself "such tasks as it is able to solve". As any social system flourishes it creates the material forces required for its overthrow, including new social classes capable of bringing a new social order into fruition. Under feudalism it was the bourgeoisie. Today it is the working class that embodies the hopes of humanity.

This is not simply an article of faith. The working class produces almost all of the world's wealth. Many times throughout history the workers have shown themselves capable of taking over production and organising it even more efficiently, without the unnecessary cost of bosses and landlords.

Moreover, ever since its arrival on the scene of history, the working class has been driven by the logic of its class position into struggle against the ruling class and the established order, placing it at the forefront of every movement for liberation and progress.

'Socialism or barbarism' therefore signifies that only the seizure of power by the working class can defeat imperialism and at last overthrow the decaying capitalist order. But it must also be recognised that the ruling class will stop at nothing, even at the risk of undermining its own civilisation, in order to crush the emergence of a new society within the old.

When the workers of Paris were massacred in 1871, the killing was so savage that even the respectable bourgeois press pleaded with the authorities to stop, as the stench of the corpses was so overpowering. In the twentieth century, the European bourgeoisie was prepared to unleash the monster of fascism on Europe in order to liquidate the workers' movement, rather than risk its own overthrow.

Likewise, in the recent period, the Sudanese ruling class was more than willing to use the Rapid Support Forces as its attack dogs against the revolutionary movement. For years this reactionary paramilitary force was groomed and funded not only by the Sudanese state but by a host of foreign powers. The result has been the destruction of the country.

The fate of Sudan should serve as a warning: any revolution that stops short of the complete overthrow of the bourgeoisie and its state is preparing for disaster.

War Triptych (1938), Aurelio Arteta, painted during the Spanish Civil War

THE PARTY

It might reasonably be asked, if the working class is truly capable of overthrowing capitalism and leading society out of the decaying capitalist order, why has this not been achieved already?

Certainly, the survival of imperialism cannot be put down to any lack of courage or determination on the part of the workers when they enter onto the road of revolution. Over the last 100 years, almost every country on the planet has been rocked by inspiring movements of the masses, which have posed the question of power point blank.

However, the vast majority of these movements have not led to the overthrow of capitalism. And what the experience of the last century has proven beyond all doubt is that the power and heroism of the masses, while absolutely essential for any revolution, are not enough by themselves.

What is needed is organisation and, above all, a leadership capable of facing up to the immense tasks of history, and bringing the struggle to a victorious conclusion. And it is this decisive factor that has tragically been lacking in so many cases.

This is not simply down to accidents or individual mistakes. As the masses move into struggle it is natural that they first look to well-known figures or organisations, or those that offer the path of least resistance. But these tend to look to the past, or are completely bewildered by the situation.

Through their own experience of events, workers and youth learn hard-won lessons and begin to draw revolutionary conclusions. But if no alternative leadership exists to give expression to these conclusions, it cannot be improvised in the moment. As a result, the movement will reach a dead end, as it did in Sudan.

The critical task of the revolutionary party is to be able to connect with the developing consciousness of the masses and win the leadership of the movement in time, before the forces of counter-revolution are able to pacify or crush the movement.

This is no simple task, and so it requires that such a party be built *before* the volcano of revolution erupts. In his reply to Luxemburg's 'Junius' pamphlet, Lenin recognised the urgency of building such an organisation, when he wrote:

> "A very great defect in revolutionary Marxism in Germany as a whole is its lack of a compact illegal organisation that would systematically pursue its line and educate the masses in the spirit of the new tasks…"

These words would carry a heavy significance during the German Revolution of 1918. Luxemburg and other revolutionary Marxists began the crucial struggle to build a revolutionary leadership when they founded the Communist Party of Germany in December 1918. But by then the revolution had already broken out, and the revolutionaries were dealt a heavy blow with the brutal murder of Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, less than a month later.

The tragedy of the German Revolution has been repeated many times. The inspiring revolutionary wave that swept Europe at the end of the Second World War could have fundamentally changed the course of history, but it was deliberately blocked, and diverted into 'safe' channels by its own leadership.

Even in the United States, the greatest imperialist power on the planet, had a sizable revolutionary communist party been built during the tumultuous years of the 1960s, capitalism might have been overthrown.

Between 2019 and 2021, the workers and youth of Sudan had power within their reach. That they did not seize it is solely down to their leaders, who constantly held back the movement in order to keep it within the bounds of a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy – a transition which was completely ruled out by the nature of Sudanese capitalism.

One cannot help but think back to the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. The Spanish masses could have taken power many times over, but they were held back by their parties in the name of 'order'. The result was unimaginable horror, as it is today in Sudan.

The historic dilemma of 'socialism or barbarism' thus resolves itself into the practical political question of *the revolutionary party*.

Returning to Marx's profound statement – "Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve" – the potential for a worldwide revolutionary party of the working class exists everywhere. In fact, it has never been greater.

On a global scale, the working class has never been stronger. Meanwhile in most of the world the ruling class is the weakest it has been for decades, and a whole generation is being radicalised under the banner of the 'Gen Z revolutions'.

The working class and the oppressed masses of the world will not allow the ruling class to drag us down to hell without a struggle, which will put all the revolutions of the past in the shade.

The tasks of Marxists today are to get organised; to reach the most advanced layer of the workers and youth; to build parties of thousands of steeled communist revolutionaries, ready and able to connect with the struggle of the masses during the titanic struggles to come; and finally to lead the way to the seizure of power by the working class.

If history has taught us anything, it is that this task will neither be easy nor straightforward. But there is no greater cause on earth.

Sudan has shown us the stakes. Let us go forward, fully conscious of the challenges that impend, and doubly determined to smash all obstacles in our path. ■

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NO TIME TO LOSE

Barbarism is not only a future prospect; it is spreading now. But this is no reason to abandon hope.

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REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

SUDAN

FROM REVOLUTION TO BARBARISM

The Sudanese Revolution of 2018-21 was one of the most powerful movements of the masses so far this century. In this article, **Thomas Soud** explores the background to the revolution, its incredible potential, and how it was defeated – leading to the barbarism we see in the region today.

Counter-revolution has pulled Sudan into the depths of barbarism.

In 2019, the workers had power in their hands, but the reformist leaders betrayed them and handed power back to the regime. By 2022, the revolution was lost.

A year later, the revolution's executioners turned their guns on each other, each backed by a constellation of different foreign powers. Now they have laid waste to Khartoum, launched a genocide in Darfur, and unleashed the world's most catastrophic famine in 40 years.

To date at least 400,000 people have been slaughtered, 4 million have fled the country, and a further 7 million have been internally displaced. More than 30 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, of which 6.3 million face extreme levels of starvation. Two and a half years of war have effectively ripped the country in half.

Socialism or barbarism is not an empty phrase, but exactly the perspective

From the '6 April Revolution' of 1985 (Mister Jiff)

Opposite: Train bringing people to the sit-in at Khartoum, 17 August 2019 (Osama Elfaki)

that faced Sudan in 2019. Revolutionaries must absorb the lessons of Sudan to prepare for future battles.

SUDANESE CAPITALISM

The British conquered Sudan in 1898, and through a brutal occupation, set about transforming the Sudanese economy. Before the British, capitalism was non-existent in Sudan. Via their rule, the country's subsistence peasant farmers were brought into the world market, growing cotton and other agricultural products in the arable Nile Valley.

Although industry remained absent outside of the capital, Khartoum, the world market spurred on the railways to crisscross the desert. By 1950, the railway sector employed 100,000 workers, 10,000 of whom worked in the central office in Atbara alone. It was under these conditions that railway workers became the first to unionise in 1949, three years after the founding of the Sudanese Communist Party.

British capitalism dominated the Sudanese economy. The British controlled the railways, the industries that processed raw agricultural exports, and the banking system. A native Sudanese capitalist class was nearly non-existent. To stabilise their rule, the British undertook the artificial construction of such a class. They opened Sudan's first schools and, following a pattern seen across the empire, cultivated a comprador bourgeoisie – a class wholly dependent on imperialism, lacking an independent economic or political base.

So weak and enfeebled was this Sudanese bourgeoisie that when the first bourgeois-democratic government came to power following independence in 1956, it soon invited the military to take over to stabilise the country. Imperialist domination meant that most of the limited industrial infrastructure was either directly controlled by the British, or indirectly through their grip on finance. This stunted the development of an independent bourgeoisie, but simultaneously amplified the relative strength of the proletariat, which held the potential to lead the masses to the conquest of power.

This process was far from unique. It aligned with the theory of permanent revolution, as articulated by Trotsky in 1906 in reference to Russia. According to this theory, the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development cannot play a progressive role. This was fully confirmed in Sudan. The country saw three bourgeois-democratic governments: 1956–1958, 1964–1969, and 1985–1989. In each case, the bourgeoisie was weak, divided, corrupt, and terrified of the working class. Each period ended in a military dictatorship.

In all three instances, the working class could have taken power. It was the Sudanese workers, through mass general strikes, who toppled the military in the October Revolution of 1964. The 1969 coup, led by Colonel Nimeiri, was driven by the discontent of petty-bourgeois 'Free Officers', who echoed the example of Nasser in Egypt and looked to the Soviet Union for leadership. And once again, it was the working class that brought down Nimeiri in 1985, as his regime degenerated into an Islamist dictatorship.

The role of the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) should have mirrored that of the Bolsheviks in 1917: to show the masses that capitalism offers no solution, and that only the seizure of power by the working class, in alliance with the peasantry, could offer a way forward. But the SCP failed in this historic task.

By the late 1960s, the SCP had become the second-largest communist party in Africa, with over 10,000 disciplined members. It led both the trade unions and the student movement. Yet this tremendous potential was squandered due to the limitations of Stalinist theory.

Under the guidance of the Soviet Union bureaucracy, the SCP adhered to the Menshevik-inspired 'two-stage theory' of revolution, which asserted that the revolution in Sudan could only be bourgeois-democratic in nature. Hence the communists were ordered to play the role of merely assisting a 'progressive' bourgeoisie to come to power. Some within the party even identified themselves as 'revolutionary capitalists', and formed an outright bourgeois wing.

As a result, the party broke under the hammer blows of events. Its participation in the 1964 government caused internal splits. Nimeiri's rise in 1969 caused another rupture. The failed Communist-led coup of 1971 shattered what remained.

By the time of the 1985 revolution, the SCP was discredited. Its failure to lead, compounded by the global retreat of the workers' movement, allowed the dictatorship of Omar Al-Bashir to consolidate

power for the next 30 years, reducing the party to a marginal, ageing rump.

When the 'Glorious Revolution' of 2019 struck, the limited role the SCP played was not due to mass support, but instead because of a thin layer of veteran leaders, who were quickly able to manoeuvre themselves into influential positions in the movement using their previous connections, rather than due to any real influence amongst the revolutionary youth.

THE REGIME OF AL-BASHIR

Al-Bashir's coup of 1989 was the victory of the counter-revolution, ending the revolution of 1985. A black reaction descended as Al-Bashir ruled side by side with the Islamists. Trade unions were forced underground, prices were hiked, and the minimum wage was slashed.

Al-Bashir understood that despite the immense defeat the workers had suffered in 1989, rule by the sword alone was insufficient to maintain his regime. Eventually, though it might take a generation, the working class would recover its strength, the regime would split, and its power would falter. The situation for Al-Bashir was precarious, but rising oil prices offered him room for manoeuvre.

In the late 1990s, an oil boom allowed for a rapid expansion of state spending. Parts of Khartoum began to look like Dubai, as huge infrastructure projects sprouted throughout the city. Between 1999 and 2013, the government budget increased thirteenfold. Huge food subsidies were given to the workers and peasants, while the army was showered in wealth. Al-Bashir included himself in this, allegedly syphoning off $9 billion to his personal account by 2019.

Simultaneously, he continued to whip up ethnic tensions in the west, particularly in Darfur, leading to the 2005 genocide where over 300,000 people were slaughtered. The perpetrators were the Janjaweed, aka the 'Devils on Horseback'. In 2013, this genocidal militia was organised into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF): a paramilitary specifically created by Al-Bashir to coup-proof himself. By balancing between the official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF, he believed his rule would be secure.

These beliefs were misplaced. In 2011, South Sudan — with the backing of US imperialism, succeeded in gaining independence. The US had a tense relationship with Al-Bashir.

National independence did not bring liberation to the South. Instead, ethnic divisions and imperialist meddling paved the way for the South Sudan Civil War. Between 2013 and 2020, 400,000 people were killed.

In 2013, with oil revenues from South Sudan gone, Al-Bashir began an austerity campaign. Fuel subsidies were cut, doubling prices overnight. Riding the wave of the Arab Spring, the Sudanese masses stormed onto the streets. Al-Bashir immediately showed his ruthlessness, slaughtering 200 people in an attempt to maintain his power. With the opposition parties playing no role, terrified of the regime, and with no political programme to solve Sudan's deep crisis after a century of imperialist plundering, the movement was temporarily cowed.

The temporary defeat of the movement in 2013 coincided with the discovery of vast gold reserves across Darfur. For a moment, it appeared that the regime would stabilise. Gold rapidly became the country's main export, and was used to maintain the vast payments to the armies and the limited subsidies for the working class.

But Sudanese gold forged a poison chalice. The vast majority was very close to the surface, and spread out over a large area. Rather than encouraging highly centralised production funded by large monopolies and the central government, gold production instead developed vast numbers of small artisanal mines. These were controlled by various tribal leaders,

Above: "Bashir must go", poster from December 2018

Below: 1989 coup d'état; Al-Bashir is in the centre

with mercenary groups enforcing the most horrific conditions. The result was that the central government could not easily enrich itself. It is estimated that 50 per cent of gold production is smuggled out of Sudan illegally.

It was through the blood-drenched gold of Darfur that the RSF was being transformed into a powerful organisation. Gold trader, smuggler, border guard and counter-revolutionary militia all in one, it began to clash with the official Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Al-Bashir had succeeded in balancing between these two armed bodies of men, but his options were running out.

Oil from the south had been cut off, gold in the west rarely made its way to Khartoum, and the global economy was stumbling from one crisis to another. By 2016, the economy was in freefall: GDP per capita fell by 31 per cent, inflation rose to 122 per cent, and the government went cap in hand to the IMF. The IMF agreed to bail out Sudan, but only if subsidies for basic goods were ended – in other words, the crisis must be passed on to the working class. The government obliged.

Unemployment rose to 20 per cent. With subsidies removed, the price of bread tripled, and 45 per cent of the population now stood below the poverty line. All whilst the army, as part of Al-Bashir's coup-proofing strategy, dazzled itself in luxury, consuming up to 70 per cent of government revenue.

It was these conditions that convinced a small number of protesters to take to the streets in December 2018. They were the spark that ignited a blaze.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

On 13 December 2018, a few dozen protesters bravely marched in the town of Ad-Damazin, demanding that subsidies on bread be reinstated. They were under the leadership of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a small coalition of six white-collar unions. Within a year, they would become the leading body of the Sudanese Revolution.

Immediately, the protesters were arrested, and the doctors' union, as part of the SPA, called for further protests. On 19 December, workers outside of the SPA in Atbara rallied to the call and came out in support. Marching under the symbol of bread, they shouted "Down with the rule of thieves!"[1] and burned down Al-Bashir's party headquarters in the city. Now that the starting pistol had been fired, demonstrations then broke out throughout the country.

The movement of the masses shook the opposition parties. Since 2005, the dictatorship had marginally expanded political freedoms. However, rather than using this space to challenge the regime, the liberal parties accommodated themselves to it. Meanwhile, the Communist Party, still clinging to the 'two-stage theory', tailed the liberals.

When spontaneous youth-led protests previously emerged in 2012 and 2013, the opposition played no decisive role. Among the youth, these parties were described as "hopeless and senile". Now events threatened to make them completely irrelevant.

Thus, on 1 January 2019, they decided to unite with the SPA into a broad coalition called the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). This coalition included everyone who wasn't directly part of the regime, from the Communist Party, to the liberals, to disaffected Islamists in Darfur.

Despite the SPA being the largest force, it was the bourgeois faction of the FFC who came to dominate it. FFC leaders such as former prime minister and aristocrat Sadiq Al-Mahdi, or the darling of big business Al-Digair, were not found on the streets in the spring of 2019, but rather in boardrooms and palaces throughout the Arab world.

The FFC's programme was vague and broad, limited to only those demands that would be acceptable to the capitalist class. They called for a transitional government to deliver peace, democracy, justice, women's rights, and economic development. However, the impotence of this coalition became evident in its inability to agree on concrete demands – even the question of repealing Sharia law was left unresolved.

Whilst the leadership of the revolution was busy building this coalition, Al-Bashir wasted no time. On 17 January, state security forces were sent to terrorise the masses.

Police grabbed protesters and smashed their heads into the pavement. It did not matter if they were men, women, children or the elderly – the regime did not discriminate. Security forces tear-gassed worshippers outside mosques, and when

From the sit-in at the Military Headquarters in Khartoum, April 2019 (© Duha Mohammed)

a doctor attempted to provide emergency care, they shot him in the street. But the movement continued to grow. Five thousand turned up for the funeral of the slain, and the chants of "Down! Down! Down!" rang through Khartoum.

Al-Bashir banned demonstrations, but this did not stop them from growing in size. The masses had lost their fear of the government.

The women of Sudan led the way, comprising up to 70 per cent of protesters, for they had borne the brunt of the regime. Each year, 40,000-50,000 women were arrested and flogged for wearing 'obscene' clothing, which included the act of wearing trousers.

On 8 March, International Working Women's Day, the women of Sudan reminded the world of its real revolutionary traditions. Tens of thousands of women marched, chanting "Women be strong!" and "This revolution is a woman's revolution!" They descended on Khartoum's main women's prison and forced the regime to release all female detainees who had been arrested for participating in the revolution.

This victory filled workers across the country with confidence. By the end of March, 15 out of Sudan's 18 provinces were experiencing mass protests, as all layers of the toiling and oppressed masses joined the struggle.

THE FALL OF AL-BASHIR

As revolution swept the entire country, the SPA had been firmly pushed behind the position that Al-Bashir must fall. They called for a mass movement on 6 April to march on the military complex in Khartoum.

The morning of 6 April began as a trickle. Some protesters doubted how many would come, but as the day progressed, more workers poured forward onto the streets. By the time the march approached the military complex, an estimated 800,000 had joined. Inspired by the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and the iconic occupation of Tahrir Square, the SPA called for a mass sit-in until the regime fell:

> "At this historic moment, we urge you to stay the course on the streets surrounding the Headquarters of the Armed Forces, and in every site across the country, until the tyranny is dismantled once and for all."[2]

Through the sit-in, the revolutionaries created a city within a city, blockading the government inside their palaces. Traffic ground to a halt, and the masses were jubilant. One sign read "Sorry for the [traffic] delay. Uprooting a regime".[3]

The regime now faced a choice: reform to placate the movement, or repress to crush it. Al-Bashir decided that the most brutal force was necessary. On the morning of 10 April, he began preparing the RSF to slaughter the masses. His main cleric was on the verge of issuing a fatwa to say it was permissible to kill 30 per cent of the demonstrators to restore order.

But that morning, the rest of the regime flinched. They knew power was passing out of their hands and shifting into the street. They sensed the army itself was cracking as fraternisation between protesters and soldiers grew day by day. Perhaps the government could order the massacre of 30 per cent of the revolutionaries, but they feared it would be their last command.

Recognising the shifting balance of power, Vice President Ibn Auf met with high-ranking generals of both the RSF and SAF, and together they decided that Al-Bashir must go.

The vice president announced to the country that Al-Bashir's 30-year rule had come to an end. He declared himself the new head of state, and announced that the military would rule for two years until democratic elections were held. He demanded that the encampment must disband, and that a military curfew would enforce this.

The masses did not accept. The previous day, on 9 April, they had demanded "Fall, that's all", so on 10 April, they chanted "Fall again!" The curfew was simply ignored. The real situation of power was clear for all to see. The new president brought not an ounce of extra stability. So on 11 April, the generals acted once more. The new president was removed, and the Transitional Military Council, an alliance between the SAF and the RSF, took control.

Two dictators had been overthrown within 24 hours. Power had been lying in the streets, yet the SPA had allowed the generals to pick it back up. The face had changed twice, but the regime remained in place. Why had the masses not been able to take power into their own hands? Why had their leaders failed to seize the moment?

To answer this question, we must first analyse the different groups that composed the Sudanese revolution. On the side of reaction, the principal characters were the RSF and the SAF. On the side of revolution stood the FFC, the SPA and the spontaneous organisations of the workers.

A WORKERS' STATE IN EMBRYO

The beating heart of the revolution was the workers' sit-in outside the military complex. It would last from 6 April to 3 June 2019.

Within the sit-in, classrooms were organised to teach political ideas and the goals of the revolution. Communal

kitchens were providing meals, supplied by workers from outside who ensured regular food deliveries. Water stations were organised throughout.

The sit-in was a palace of lively political debate. Speeches were given throughout the day as people discussed the next steps forward. A giant TV screen was set up, displaying messages of international solidarity. In the evening, the same screen would show the latest football matches. Drumming, poetry and music were ever present, while artists painted murals along the walls.

The ruling class always seeks to maintain control through divide-and-rule tactics. Sexism, racism and sectarian divisions are part and parcel of capitalist rule. But the class struggle has the power to cut across these divisions. Inside the encampment, women could walk freely without a headscarf, and mingle with men their

Inside the sit-in, April 2019 (© Duha Mohammed)

age – an act completely prohibited by the government. Religious divides that had torn Sudan apart were being overcome. Christian Copts held fabric over muslims praying to shield them from the midday sun. And when the government attempted to whip up division by spreading racist propaganda about Darfurians, the revolutionaries replied:

> "Al-Bashir, you arrogant racist, we are all Darfur".[4]

The sit-in demonstrated in practice that when given the opportunity, workers can cut across the backward and reactionary ideas pumped into society by the ruling class. It became a cultural melting pot, offering a glimpse of what could be achieved if workers held power in their hands.

The sit-in itself was spontaneously organised by the workers. A series of elected committees emerged to manage day-to-day life. The Protection Committee oversaw security, set up barricades and monitored checkpoints. The Provisions Committee coordinated food and drink. The Medical Committee provided treatment for the injured. The Awareness Committees educated participants in politics and consciously attempted to tackle issues such as discrimination. Finally, the Organisational Committee oversaw all the others and managed membership distribution.

The organisation was so effective that within the sit-in's controlled area, the streets were clean, well-managed, and orderly. Meanwhile, those still controlled by the government remained in decay, littered with rubbish. The enthusiasm, creativity, and audacity of the workers overcame every challenge they faced.

The sit-in was the beating heart of the revolution, but the revolution had arteries, veins and capillaries. These were the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees. Each committee organised workers at the local level. They were democratically elected with 40-50 people in each one, and 7-10 committees per neighbourhood.

They first emerged as organisers of local protests: an essential task once social media was blocked. Members of the Resistance Committees would go door to door informing workers of upcoming demonstrations. As repression intensified, traditional assembly methods became dangerous, so they would work with local shops and homes to allow protesters to hide in back rooms in the run-up to a march. Then, at the signal of a banging drum, protesters would flood the streets, overwhelming the security forces.

Inside the sit-in, April 2019
(© Duha Mohammed)

Opposite: Spent tear gas canister that was fired on protesters, 17 January 2019
(© Duha Mohammed)

As the revolution developed and the workers gained confidence, the committees' responsibilities expanded. They began regulating the price of public transport, organising the distribution of fuel, and setting up grocery markets where food was sold at cost. They organised street clean-ups, construction projects and other local initiatives, raising funds from residents. The scale was vast. There were 700 committees in Khartoum alone and over 3,000 across the country.

What the sit-in and Neighbourhood Resistance Committees represented was workers' power in embryo. Call them committees, call them communes, call them soviets ('councils' in Russian) – it doesn't matter. They were the masses taking power into their own hands, stepping onto the stage of history to decide their fate, struggling to birth a new society. Do not just take the word of Marxists. One particularly class-conscious writer for the *Financial Times*, a bourgeois mouthpiece, wrote:

> "One cannot know for sure what Russia felt like in 1917 as the tsar was being toppled, or France in 1871 in the heady, idealistic days of the short-lived Paris Commune. But it must have felt something like Khartoum in April 2019."[5]

The situation emerging in Sudan was one of 'dual power', in which the bourgeois state is confronted by emerging organs of workers' power, capable of taking control of society. But this emerging workers' power was only at an embryonic stage.

The call for the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees to link up was not made. It was actively resisted by the SPA, which fetishised horizontalism. They failed to understand that a situation of dual power is a very tenuous thing. It cannot be maintained indefinitely. Either the workers will gather their strength, smash the bourgeois state and become the sovereign power of society. Or, the initiative will pass to the counter-revolution.

In the sit-in, the slogan "All power to the Resistance Committees" was never heard; the idea of overthrowing the capitalist state and using them as the foundation of a workers' state never crossed the lips of any of the parties involved.

It would not be until 2022 that there would be the first feeble and rearguard attempts to unite the Resistance Committees. Long before then, the counter-revolutionaries had burned the sit-in to a crisp.

A PETTY-BOURGEOIS LEADERSHIP

Due to the meekness of the political opposition the seething anger of the masses could find no political expression. On the industrial front the traditional unions had been completely co-opted by the military regime. The most militant layers therefore had to find new fighting organisations.

The SPA was one of these small, but militant groups. Tracing its roots to the movement in 2012, the SPA was officially founded in the summer of 2018 as an underground coalition of six trade unions: of the lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers and teachers.

When the struggle erupted in 2018, the SPA showed considerable tenacity, refusing to back down in the face of state repression, which raised its political authority in the eyes of the masses. In this way, the SPA became the undisputed *de facto* leadership of the first stages of the revolution.

The ranks of the SPA contained many determined and self-sacrificing militants, but the higher up you went, the more white-collar and middle-class it became. This was reflected in the outlook and methods of the organisation's

leadership. It was intentionally organised based on consensus, with a 'leaderless' structure that meant any large differences simply remained unresolved. As with any 'leaderless' organisation, the layers that dominated would be those with the most time and resources on their hands, i.e. the most middle class.

The petty-bourgeois, reformist outlook of the SPA leadership would play a fatal role. Completely accepting the necessity of Sudanese capitalism, it therefore accepted the necessity of the bourgeois state. In Sudan, this meant accepting the power of the military, which was an integral part both of the state and the ruling class.

Therefore, unlike the masses, the leadership of the SPA was overcome with pessimism from the beginning. They firmly believed that the revolution would fail, and in interviews given as late as March 2019, spoke of how little hope they had that the protests would remove Al-Bashir.

Their consensus politics meant that a position was only adopted once it became obvious to all. This was not leadership guiding the movement forward, but trailing it.

This consensus leadership became more fraught as the revolution intensified. On the left, new forces, awakened by the revolution, entered the ranks of the SPA. Meanwhile, the old leadership who had been in prison or exile were now returning as the revolution advanced. But these were the most middle-class layers, and clashed with the shadow leadership who had actually led the revolution from December to April.

The right wing of the SPA even demanded that it stop playing any leading role in the revolution whatsoever. They said 'we are trade unionists and not politicians', and it should be the right of political parties to decide which way forward. This position can only be comprehended once you realise that many who put this forward were members of other political parties, who stood to gain if the SPA abdicated its leading political role.

The problem was that there was an element of truth in the right's criticism. If the SPA was playing a leading political role, then they could not limit themselves to being mere trade unionists. A political party was required, with its own political programme on how to restructure society.

Syndicalism, the idea that the working class does not need a political party, has been discredited time and time again. The smashing of state power is political. The creation of a workers' state and the programme it must carry out are the most political acts. By failing to fully break with these methods, the SPA hampered the revolution more often than it led it.

Once Al-Bashir fell on 10 April, the SPA were taken aback and had no idea what to do next. Rather than immediately calling for the Resistance Committees to assume power, for the rank-and-file troops in the army to break with and depose the generals, and for mass general strikes to make this a reality, the leaders hesitated and debated amongst themselves.

The generals, meanwhile, lost no time. The SAF and RSF picked up power from the streets and continued the old regime with only two figureheads lost. Rather than calling for them to be overthrown, the SPA said we must negotiate with those who have just stolen power from the masses.

The logic of attempting to strip politics out of industrial and mass struggle, combined with broad-based consensus-building, flowed directly into the errors of 'Popular Front' politics. Whilst not necessarily consciously understood, the creation of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) was an echo of the disastrous 'Popular Front' of the Spanish Republic in the 1930s.

The idea of the Popular Front is that the workers must combine with the 'progressive' bourgeoisie to achieve and defend liberal democratic gains. This tactic was a complete failure in the 1930s, it was a failure in Sudan in the 1960s, and it would be so again in 2019.

The FFC stretched from the SPA, to the Communist Party, to the liberals, to the dissident Islamists. The only uniting factor was that Al-Bashir must fall; once this was achieved, it began to decompose into its component parts.

The FFC secretly negotiated with the Transitional Military Council in May, behind the backs of the masses. The liberals held the position of a joint military and civilian government, whilst allowing questions such as women's oppression and the economic suffering of the people to be dropped. This flowed from the class position of the bourgeoisie, who were scrambling for law and order, afraid that now the genie of revolution had been let out of the bottle, it would not be going back in.

The military understood the inherent divisions much better than the workers' leaders. They played different parts of the FFC off against each other throughout the revolution, and in doing so maintained their own rule. The absence of a decisive and clear political programme on the left ultimately ended up having everyone looking to the right.

The masses were looking to the SPA due to no other political alternative being built up in advance. The SPA were looking to the FFC, claiming that, since they were not politicians, they had no right to lead. The petty-bourgeois leaders of the FFC were looking to the liberals and their vision of a democratic, but capitalist, Sudan. The liberals were looking to the

conservatives to ensure the revolution did not go too far and challenge private property. And the conservatives were looking to the Transitional Military Council, who were planning on drowning the entire revolution in blood.

THE ARMY BEGINS TO BREAK

The Transitional Military Council was composed of two parts: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The SAF was the official Sudanese Army under the leadership of General Al-Burhan. Al-Burhan lacked any natural charisma and was an accidental figure to be the *de facto* head of state after the fall of Al-Bashir. He was a general through and through. When he announced military rule on 11 April, it was not the speech of a politician, but the barking orders of a drill sergeant.

The greatest weakness of the SAF was its composition. The generals were a key component of the ruling class, but the rank-and-file soldiers were workers. The same torrent of social forces that had stirred the masses into action could not help but find an echo in the ranks of the SAF.

The consciousness of the army is not like the police. The army is taught that they are defending the nation, giving their lives for the people back home. So once they are told by the generals to turn their guns on the people, the army can split on class lines, and even break apart entirely. It was precisely this that had occurred in 1985 and had led to the fall of Nimeiri. Now the same process was taking place again.

Neighbourhood Resistance Committees appealed to the soldiers to defect. Defecting soldiers were then given sanctuary in homes to hide from officers seeking retribution. The Resistance Committees would welcome defecting soldiers as

heroes, and as word spread through the ranks, more and more followed suit.

All layers of the revolution were putting pressure on the army. When one general arrived home, he discovered to his shock that his daughter had joined the revolution. Over dinner, she pleaded, "Don't shoot us, Dad!".[6]

The spontaneous appeals of the masses were shaking the army from head to toe. Soldiers would arrest activists in front of their commanders, take them down an alley, and then, as soon as they were out of sight, set them free, informing their commanders that the revolutionaries managed to escape. When asked to move into position, they would delay and dawdle, and in some cases refuse outright.

> The generals knew that one clear and decisive command from the leadership of the revolution and entire SAF would crumble, as the soldiers would defect *en masse*. But this call never came. Defections remained a local and spontaneous affair. The SPA and FFC did not conduct a mass and systematic campaign within the rank and file to defect, to break the military along class lines. Instead, they attempted to negotiate with it.

Still, the mood within the SAF meant that it could not be used fully as a weapon of reaction. For this, the ruling class leaned on the other half of the Transitional Military Council, the RSF.

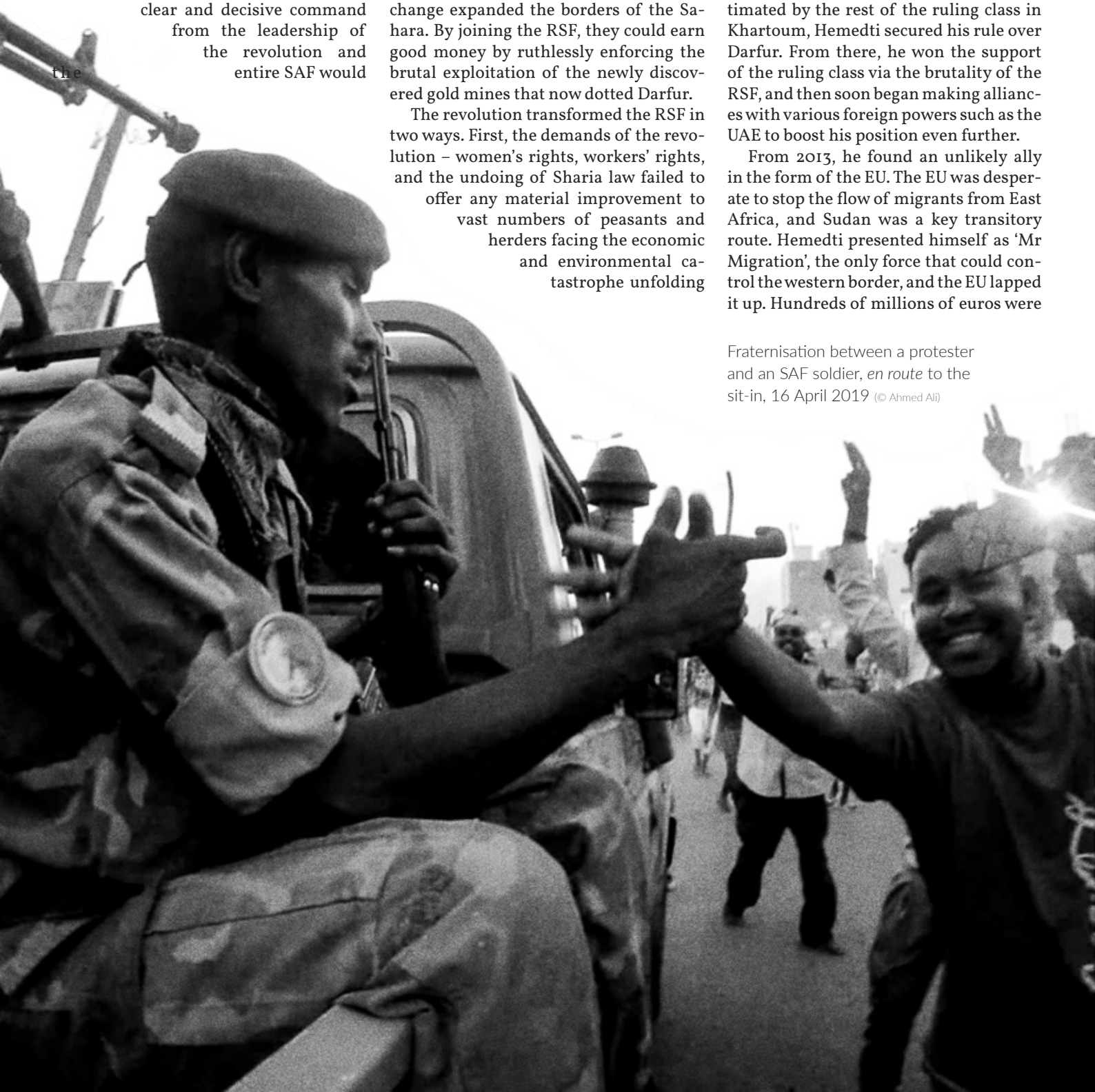
BLACK REACTION

The RSF was fundamentally a mercenary organisation. It based itself on Arab nomads who felt their entire way of life was being squeezed out of existence as climate change expanded the borders of the Sahara. By joining the RSF, they could earn good money by ruthlessly enforcing the brutal exploitation of the newly discovered gold mines that now dotted Darfur.

The revolution transformed the RSF in two ways. First, the demands of the revolution – women's rights, workers' rights, and the undoing of Sharia law failed to offer any material improvement to vast numbers of peasants and herders facing the economic and environmental catastrophe unfolding throughout the eastern Sahel. A bold socialist programme to alleviate the poverty of the rural masses was required to win them over, but the liberals in Khartoum put forward 'Democracy' and 'Human Rights' to layers that the state itself could barely reach. Reactionary tribal leaders seized on this vacuum and whipped up their base against the revolution. Whilst the rank-and-file of the SAF fraternised with the revolutionaries, the RSF became the hardened shock-troops of the counter-revolution.

Secondly, their leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka. 'Hemedti', sensed a greater opportunity ahead. Beginning as a mere camel herder, he had used the RSF to become one of the most powerful men in the country. Continually underestimated by the rest of the ruling class in Khartoum, Hemedti secured his rule over Darfur. From there, he won the support of the ruling class via the brutality of the RSF, and then soon began making alliances with various foreign powers such as the UAE to boost his position even further.

From 2013, he found an unlikely ally in the form of the EU. The EU was desperate to stop the flow of migrants from East Africa, and Sudan was a key transitory route. Hemedti presented himself as 'Mr Migration', the only force that could control the western border, and the EU lapped it up. Hundreds of millions of euros were



Fraternisation between a protester and an SAF soldier, *en route* to the sit-in, 16 April 2019 (© Ahmed Ali)

sent into the pockets of the RSF over the 2010s as part of this Faustian pact. As late as 2022, Italian military instructors were found to be training RSF soldiers to keep the refugees out of Europe.

The leaders in the SAF despised how their power and prestige were now under threat from these tribal nomads. But despite the searing hatred between the two groups, they always maintained a united front in crushing the revolution.

It was the RSF and SAF who allied to remove Al-Bashir. They would, in various forms, rule jointly until April 2023, when they finally turned their guns on each other.

THE MAY 2019 GENERAL STRIKE

Here is how things stood in April 2019: the masses were gaining confidence and power; they had overthrown Al-Bashir, and the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees were spreading far and wide. This was despite the petty-bourgeois leadership of the SPA, who had gobsmacked themselves by achieving the revolution. Suffering from vertigo, the SPA had formed a popular front as part of the FFC, whose bourgeois leaders were already trying to do a deal with the military and halt the revolution in its tracks.

The SAF and the RSF had acted swiftly with the fall of Al-Bashir. They set up the Transitional Military Council and sent different proposals to different parts of the FFC, in order to play them off against each other. They hoped to play for time to cement the rule of the counter-revolution.

The Transitional Military Council had even coined a term for their tactic of delaying: 'tagility'. They hoped to draw everything out so that the revolution would lose momentum. They understood the sit-in could not last indefinitely. As April dragged into May, the number of protesters fell from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands.

Meanwhile, the ruling class orchestrated a vicious libel campaign against the encampment. They claimed that it contained widespread prostitution, that it was rife with drug and alcohol sellers, and that law and order had broken down. But what was breaking down was bourgeois law and bourgeois order. Under the cover of night, the RSF would harass the encampment, brutalising and killing workers when they got the chance.

On 14 May, the Transitional Military Council announced that negotiations with the FFC had resulted in an agreement. There would be a three-year transitional period of joint military and civilian rule, followed by elections where a third of the seats would be reserved for counter-revolutionary forces in advance. As part of the deal, the military council demanded that the sit-in disband.

The workers were furious. They were being instructed to abandon the revolution completely. Under enormous pressure from the masses, the SPA denounced the deal that the rest of the FFC had capitulated to, and agreed to organise a massive two-day general strike as a show of strength and feeling.

On 28 May, Sudan stood still.

The SPA unleashed a strike that will go down as one of the most powerful displays of strength of the working class in history. In the capital, observance was nearly 100 per cent. Throughout the country it didn't matter if it was hospitals or oil refineries, banks or government ministries, airports or flour mills; all sectors were affected once the workers moved decisively.

The strike also enjoyed immense support amongst state employees, from the Central Bank, Tax department and Ministry of Labour. This palpably raises the question of power: if the people who run the machinery of the state answer to the strike leaders and not the government, then who is the government?

Strike committee after strike committee published resolutions declaring their willingness to fight to the end.

The strike committee at Port Sudan declared:

"We reaffirm our readiness and responsiveness to all the decisions by the SPA

RSF soldiers at a military-backed rally in Khartoum, 29 June 2019 (© AP / Alamy)

in the context of restoring full civil authority and sovereignty, and declare our readiness for civil disobedience and an open political strike until the handover of authority into civilian hands. And as we have previously said, the instructions are with you and the [deed] is with us."[7]

Morning pickets transformed into mass afternoon rallies. State intimidation proved impotent. The force of the workers felt unstoppable.

The RSF attempted to reassert control over the situation through terror. They stormed the electric company to try and break striking workers and arrest their leaders. But the workers came forward and said that if they carried out the arrests, then they would stop all electricity to the RSF buildings and premises. The reactionaries were forced to retreat.

The lesson was clear: not a wheel turns, not a light bulb flickers, not a telephone rings without the kind permission of the working class. Once that force is unleashed fully, nothing can stop it.

But that force was not unleashed fully. The strike was not part of a campaign and a strategy for the forceful removal of the military leaders and the entire bourgeois state it stood upon. Instead, it was part of an appeal to convince the military leaders to step down and for a liberal democratic government to take its place. But the liberals in the FFC had already struck a deal. It was precisely this deal that the workers opposed.

The leadership of the SPA did not put forward an independent working-class political programme. Instead, they kept it always within the limits of bourgeois democracy, which in the case of Sudan meant military rule, with at best a civilian figurehead. The military understood this; they did not fear the FFC, nor the leaders of the SPA. What they did fear was the masses, who were the engine of the entire revolution. The May general strike had not toppled them, but the military was keen to not give the workers another chance.

THE WHIP OF COUNTER-REVOLUTION

The workers had dared to show their strength in May; now the military concluded they needed to be taught a lesson through terror. The sit-in had to go.

It was 5 am on 3 June 2019. Thousands of police and RSF soldiers gathered outside the sit-in. They were armed with AK-47s on the one hand, whips and bludgeons on the other. The signal was given, and the terror was unleashed.

Over the course of two hours, the RSF ran rampant through the sit-in. Men, women and children were shot in cold blood. Others were whipped to death as a sign of humiliation. Women were mercilessly raped. Those on the edge of life had rocks tied to them and were thrown into the Nile. Others were macheted to death where they stood.

By 7 am, over 200 revolutionaries had been slaughtered. The encampment was covered in gasoline and burned to ashes. Smoke billowed high across Khartoum as a clear message to all of what had been carried out.

Now the RSF spread out on motorbikes, inciting terror wherever they went. They flogged protesters to death, looted shops, and burned and rampaged throughout the city.

Despite appearances, terror is not carried out thoughtlessly. It is a political strategy by the ruling class to scare the

Opposite, left: Hemedti at a rally, in Galawee, northern Sudan 15 June 2019 (© AP / Alamy)

Opposite, right: Al-Burhan at the ceremony marking the start of 'transitional rule', 17 August 2019 (© AP / Alamy)

Below: Hemedti (sitting on truck) surrounded by RSF soldiers during a military-backed tribal rally in the East Nile province, 22 June 2019 (© AP / Alamy)

workers into submission. The ruling class attempts to assert to the workers: we are strong, you are weak, you have no choice but to submit.

As the RSF carried the stick in one hand, the SAF carried the carrot in the other. The SAF announced they had called off negotiations with the FFC. They claimed the FFC was wrong to accept elections in four years, and instead that there would be elections in nine months, which they would begin preparations for. Their hope was that the workers would now accept an apparent concession, fearing what greater terrors lay ahead.

But the workers were not to be cowed. They poured out onto streets following Friday prayers on the 7th, calling for nothing less than the downfall of the military junta, with many raising the slogan of a general strike. In these conditions the SPA rejected the deal and now announced that they would organise the biggest march Sudan had ever seen on 30 June, exactly 30 years after Al-Bashir had taken power.

With social media cut off, SPA leaders toured the country to spread word of the march. With demonstrations being suppressed, they met with and worked through local Neighbourhood Resistance Committees to organise. Vigils and funerals were key places of political organisation.

On 9 June, a mass general strike was called, and once again airports, banks, hospitals and factories stopped work. Mass rallies were called, and people struck, despite the tear gas and live ammunition they faced.

On 30 June, 1 million marched. They chanted: "Freedom! Civilian Rule! The revolution has just begun!" "The bullet doesn't kill – what kills is one's silence!"[8]

The immense movement of the masses, despite all the attempts at repression, had halted the counter-revolution in its tracks. Power and initiative were back on the side of the revolutionaries. But initiative needs strategy and leadership. This was still lacking.

THE JULY SELL-OUT

There was no reason that 30 June 2019 could not have been the day that the military was overthrown. Once again, the opportunity was there for power to pass into the hands of the workers.

The SPA, however, firmly believed that a broad coalition with the liberals was necessary, which in practice meant a coalition with the army. Throughout the entire revolution, the SPA leaders were terrified of the prospect of civil war. They clung to pacifism at all times and embraced and celebrated the fact that the revolutionaries did not arm themselves even when facing the most brutal violence.

This call for pacifism was not a strategy for peace, but a recipe for defeat and death on an even greater scale. As we warned at the time:

> "*If the revolution is derailed, the RSF would have no scruples in unleashing the bloodiest of civil wars if this served the purpose of keeping in power the privileged elite of Sudan.*"[9]

These words proved to be prophetic. The failure to overthrow the military laid the basis for the Third Sudanese Civil War, Sudan's most bloody disaster yet. Violence is not a policy, but a logical outcome of the classes in struggle. If you refuse violence of any kind and at any time, you disarm the revolution, allowing the masses to be trampled and murdered by the ruling class. At the decisive stage that was being reached in Sudan, this was inexcusable.

Moral platitudes were insufficient. What was needed was to break the capitalist state's monopoly on violence – through the formation of workers' defence militias by the resistance committees. Such militias would have laid the foundation for the full transfer of power to the working class.

Ironically, had the leadership harboured fewer illusions in pacifism, the overall bloodshed would almost definitely have been reduced. Instead, their ideological commitment to non-violence laid the groundwork for the July sell-out, and ultimately the current civil war.

This fetishisation of pacifism was not rooted in any longstanding tradition of the Sudanese masses. Rather, it was carefully cultivated by Western liberals in the aftermath of the failed 2013 uprising. NGOs such as Freedom House and the United States Institute of Peace – key instruments of US soft power – sought to align themselves with liberal 'revolutionaries'. Having lost much of their influence in Sudan following their support for South Sudan's secession, the US was now looking to position itself favourably with the regime's likely successors.

For six years, organisations like Freedom House worked to identify and train emerging leaders from among the masses. They organised workshops focused on non-violent tactics and liberal political ideals. Selected participants were flown abroad, courted, and groomed for influence. The aim was clear: to cultivate a new generation of leaders loyal to liberalism and the West. And given the complete lack of leadership from the left, they succeeded. Many prominent figures within the SPA and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) were consciously shaped by US imperialism into liberal cadres.

At the start of the revolution, when the SPA debated whether to demand regime change or simply higher wages, it was these foreign-trained agents who ensured the latter. They became the most fervent defenders of pacifism and the most determined opponents of workers' self-defence.

Meanwhile, the imperialists exerted pressure through other avenues as well. The US, UAE, Britain, and Saudi Arabia were desperate to bring the revolutionary wave to an end, fearing its potential to spread across the region. The FFC argued that only a power-sharing arrangement with the army could prevent civil war. The leaders of the SPA threw up their hands and declared: "We have no choice [but to

accept the deal]", since they were unable to see a way forward without the consent of at least a section of the bourgeoisie.[10]

Thus, on 9 July 2019, the FFC agreed to the formation of a transitional 'technocratic' government. It would consist of five civilian representatives from the FFC, five military officers, and one supposedly 'neutral' member forming a Sovereign Council. That 'neutral' figure later turned out to be a retired army general. The Council itself would be headed by a military appointee, with elections scheduled in three years' time.

Six months of heroic struggle by the Sudanese working class resulted in nothing more than a superficial reshuffling of those at the top. Omar al-Bashir was replaced by Abdalla Hamdok, a liberal economist, formerly employed by the United Nations, who had played absolutely no role in the revolution up to this point. But the machinery of the capitalist state remained completely intact.

Hamdok would govern for two-and-a-half years. He achieved nothing.

HAMDOK: THE IMPOTENT LIBERAL

Abdalla Hamdok had been chosen on the basis that he appeared to please everyone. In his youth, he had been a member of the Communist Party. But he had long ago swapped his party card for the suit and tie of a UN commissioner. The military understood that Hamdok was no threat whatsoever. He had even been considered so amenable that in 2018 Al-Bashir had contemplated hiring him as an economic advisor.

The masses celebrated this as a major victory, but the military knew that even if Hamdok did attempt more radical change, they held all the cards. To underscore this point, when Hamdok arrived in Khartoum the military refused to give him any place of residence. As Prime Minister, he was forced to work out of a friend's flat for his first few months in office.

On the question of the economy, Hamdok was no different from Al-Bashir. He was keen to cut subsidies to the working class, which he saw as a drain on the economy, whilst unwilling to take a penny from the vast military spending. He left the economy in the private and corrupt hands of the local and international capitalists. They allowed bread lines to snake through Khartoum, as electrical operators had to place the city on long blackouts, whilst tractors stood idle in the breadbasket of the Nile, due to a lack of fuel.

Inflation soon hit 363 per cent, and public debt-to-GDP crossed the 200 per cent mark.

On civil rights, Hamdok kowtowed to the military. He continued to censor the press, used the state apparatus to spy on some of the most prominent activists in the revolution, and refused any investigations into the 3 June massacre.

The Resistance Committees still posed a potential challenge, but they were increasingly demoralised – and Hamdok deftly played them off against one another. The idea that the Resistance Committees should primarily function as organs of mutual aid, rather than as instruments for building a new workers' state, was gaining traction. Their role, it was argued, was not to lay the foundations of workers' power, but the foundations of a new welfare state.

The transitional government actively encouraged this shift in focus. It legitimised the committees as auxiliary administrative bodies aligned with the state. It urged people to turn to them for essential goods – fuel, food, and medicine – especially during the pandemic, which claimed 16,000 lives in Khartoum alone.

As a result, the Resistance Committees were overwhelmed. Rather than patiently explaining the real role of Hamdok and putting forward a programme that replaced him with workers' control, the most dedicated revolutionaries were pulled into the role of charity workers. What had once been the embryonic organs of a workers' state became mired in the daily struggle to meet the basic needs of a collapsing society. Their revolutionary potential was slowly suffocated as they attempted to hold up the weight of an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe.

The so-called 'compromise' with the SAF and the RSF had been a complete capitulation, as the generals held all power in their hands. Hamdok was an impotent figurehead on top of a huge state machine that he did not control. In the Crisis Economic Committee, Hamdok, the 'Doctor in economics', had to remain silent, as the trumped-up camel herder Hemedti called all the shots.

This impotence was not a product of Hamdok's personality nor the immense strength of the military, but instead flowed directly from his class position. The liberals knew that a determined struggle to remove the military and establish a liberal-democratic state could only succeed by mobilising the workers and the youth. But the force of the masses would not stop with the establishment of formal democracy.

For the masses, democracy would be first and foremost a means for the betterment of their conditions. But the liberals could not satiate the workers precisely because Sudan was in the grips of a capitalist crisis from which it could not escape. Thus, unless prevented, the revolution would not stop at liberal democracy, but under the pressure of the masses, would move on to attacks on private property and the capitalist class itself. Attacks which only the military could fend off.

Thus, the choice for the liberals was the following: establish a democracy but soon risk being underneath the workers; or continue to allow the military to climb upon their shoulders, stick in the heel of their jackboot, and allow them to rule society as they pleased, siphoning off billions in the process.

The weakness of the capitalists, their inability to take society forward even by an inch, combined with the enormous strength of the workers, made the capitalists all the more willing to look to a military 'strong man' for salvation.

THE COUP OF 2021

Two years had now passed under Hamdok, with nothing solved at all. According to the sell-out in July 2019, elections were to take place in the spring of 2022. But the military was in no mood to risk the masses asserting themselves through elections. On Monday 25 October 2021, Al-Burhan of the SAF asked Hamdok to

Hamdok with Macron, 30 September 2019 (© AP / Alamy)

Opposite: From the Millions March in Khartoum, 30 November 2021, protesting the 25 October coup (© Duha Mohammed)

join him as prime minister of a reconstituted government, which would scrap elections and firmly place Sudan under a military dictatorship.

To the surprise of Al-Burhan, Hamdock refused. His thinking was that Al-Burhan wouldn't complete the coup without the backing of the US. Over the weekend, the US ambassador had told Al-Burhan that if he went ahead with the coup, the US would cut off $700 million of aid and remove Sudan from access to the World Bank, along with several other sanctions.

Al-Burhan was undeterred. Backed by Al-Sisi in Egypt, who had done the same thing eight years earlier to crush the Egyptian Revolution, he called the bluff of the US and seized power.

Al-Burhan kidnapped Hamdok, and then went on national television to announce that all flights were suspended; the internet was shut down; and that a state of emergency was in place until July 2023, when new elections would be called.

Al-Burhan had wished to present this as a *fait accompli*. But the working class had other plans.

With the announcement of the coup, the revolution was reignited. The Neighbourhood Resistance Committees were given a new lease of life. The SPA and Communist Party called for mass general strikes. One million people responded to the call when the trade unions called for mass civil disobedience.

Al-Burhan announced that for their defiance, all trade unions would be dissolved. The RSF was once again mobilised to incite terror within the crowds.

But the masses were determined to fight. They responded with the chants of "Revolutionaries and free people will continue the journey!", "The revolutionaries are not afraid of bullets!", "The people are stronger!", and "Retreat is not an option!"

Within five days of the announcement of the coup, 4 million workers were on strike, determined to stop the generals. The regime responded by arresting thousands, who came out under the fire of live ammunition.

Under the huge pressure of events, the SPA now adopted its most radical position yet. They called for the complete overthrow of the military; a full civilian government to replace it, composed only of revolutionary forces; and for the SAF and RSF to be disbanded and their leaders tried for crimes against the revolution.

But even now, their lack of political clarity showed. The question of how this was to be achieved without a workers' insurrection, without arms, without a new state to replace the old, was all left unanswered. Instead, they congratulated Hamdok for refusing to support the coup, and gave him left cover as a potential leader. This would prove fatal.

On 21 November, a month after his kidnapping, a shaky and disoriented Hamdok appeared with Hemedti and Al-Burhan, saying they had come to an agreement. He would lead a new technocratic government with elections postponed until June 2023, but the resistance would have to stop.

Immediately, the right of the FFC came out to support the deal. The left refused, but gave no perspective on how society could be changed. They continued to call for the most peaceful methods possible and refused to arm the workers.

The Khartoum Neighbourhood Resistance Committees announced, "It is our duty to resist [the generals] until we are victorious or they rule an empty country after they have killed us all".[11] But with still no perspective on how to effectively fight back, the masses were being led like lambs to slaughter.

With zero perspective from the leadership, the response to the strike action diminished. People do not face the risk of death out of mere goodwill, they need to have the belief that their actions can change history. Three years of pacifist middle-class leadership had squandered that belief, and there was no revolutionary party to show the way out.

On 3 January 2022, once the masses had gone home, Hamdok officially resigned. The SAF and RSF were given full control. All calls and struggles for a civilian government had ended up in nothing but the cemented rule of the military dictatorship. The illusions in pacifism would lead directly to the bloodiest civil war Sudan has seen, because these tyrants remained in power.

The workers had been led up a blind alley. Without a perspective of how to escape, all their energies resulted in nothing but further demoralisation. The RSF continued their campaign of terror. They attacked workers with tear gas, batons, live ammunition and anti-aircraft guns. Workers mourning the dead at funerals were valid targets, as armoured vehicles would drive people down, going back and forth to run them over.

The scale of the terror was not the decisive element of the October coup, but instead the lack of a resolute leadership with a clear perspective to fight back. This is what would ultimately drive the workers to exhaustion.

THE VICTORY OF THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION

January 2022 was the culmination of the counter-revolution. The workers in Sudan had not been physically crushed by the generals, but their leaders had led them repeatedly into a dead end. After three years of immense courage and sacrifice, the result was yet another military coup.

Three years of exertion had left the masses fatigued and demoralised. A whole string of actions was called through the early spring of 2022, but fewer and fewer turned out as hope ebbed from their hearts. No one was able to clearly explain the events that were taking place, or offer a convincing way forward.

The SAF and RSF had succeeded in quelling liberals and revolutionaries alike. They had cemented the rule of the sword. The only question was which faction would wield it. With the working class sidelined, the generals turned on each other, jostling to see who would walk away with the blood-stained spoils of the Sudanese people. The more complete the defeat of the masses, the sharper the infighting among the victors became.

Al-Burhan extended a poisoned olive branch to the RSF, proposing to incorporate them into the SAF under his command. Despite the services the RSF had offered to the counter-revolution, the Khartoumian clique still looked upon them as backwards tribal herders.

But Hemedti had no intention of backing down. He had consolidated his base in Darfur, enriching himself through the vast gold mines of the west. He had proven himself as the bloodhound of the counter-revolution, and was quickly courting international backers, particularly the UAE, whose ambitions stretched over the Horn of Africa. By January 2022, Hemedti had risen from a peripheral camel herder to the most powerful man in Sudan. He was not going to let Al-Burhan threaten his position.

The struggle for Sudan's 'top Bonaparte' had begun. The foundations of the civil war were now firmly in place.

On 16 April 2023, the RSF felt emboldened enough to move against the SAF. With fighter jets and tanks, the first salvo of the Third Sudanese Civil War was fired. Within two weeks, 800,000 refugees were fleeing Sudan as famine stalked the land. Pregnant women starved due to a lack of food. The worst famine globally for 40 years was unleashed, with 24.6 million people facing 'acute hunger', and 2 million facing famine or risk of famine.[12] By January 2025, the Sudan Doctors' Union estimated that over 522,000 children had already died of malnutrition.

For over two years, both sides have been competing to take the barbarity to new levels. Torture, castrations, beheadings and slavery are the order of the day. Babies as young as one have been raped. Sexual assault has been turned into a weapon of war.

In the west, the RSF has solidified their rule. They have reopened their genocidal campaign in Darfur against the Masalit people, fuelled by divides between the Arab nomadic herders and the black African pastoralists. In 2005 they had conducted a systematic policy of mass rape to wipe out the African population. Now the RSF took a more direct route. All black African males were to be executed, regardless of their age. Women escaped into Chad with their baby boys, lifeless on their backs due to the bullet holes through their heads.

In the past, a conflict of this magnitude would have been shaped as much in the corridors of Washington as on the battlefield. It was the United States, after all, that brokered the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, bringing an end to the

Below: Khartoum, 13 January 2022 (© Duha Mohammed)

Opposite: Sudanese refugees in Chad, 2023 (Henry Wilkins / VOA)

Second Sudanese Civil War, and ultimately splitting the country in two. But the relative decline of US imperialism has allowed a number of smaller powers to assert their interests in the region, irrespective of US foreign policy. In Sudan they have come seeking control of the Red Sea trade routes in the east, fertile land along the Nile, and gold in the west – now surging in value as the dominance of the dollar erodes.

A dizzying array of powers has intervened. The Saudis have consistently backed the SAF, while the UAE, an up-and-coming imperialist contender, has become the principal supporter of the RSF. The list of foreign players seems endless: Qatar, Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Chad have all played their part. The reverberations threaten to push South Sudan's four-year peace into another civil war.

Adding to the mad hatters' tea party, Russia initially intervened on the side of the RSF to secure gold and circumvent Western sanctions. To counter Russia's attempt to bust sanctions, the Ukrainian Army has intervened on the side of the SAF, leading to spectacular scenes of Russian mercenaries fighting Ukrainian special forces in the streets of Khartoum.

Now, however, the Russian imperialists have swapped sides, prioritising access to the Port of Sudan. Thus, the RSF have been dropped and the SAF are Russia's new allies, which has led to even more spectacular scenes of Russian mercenaries working together with Ukrainian special forces.

A full analysis of the Third Sudanese Civil War lies beyond the scope of this article. What *is* certain is that the Sudanese working class has suffered a catastrophic defeat. It will take years – perhaps decades – and massive developments not just within Sudan, but internationally, for them to regain their strength.

In the meantime, barbarism has taken hold – and it is spreading, day by day, beyond Sudan's borders.

SOCIALISM OR BARBARISM

Pacifists and cowards may claim: "Had we never fought for freedom, we would have been spared such horrors." But capitalism itself is a horror without end. The crisis in Sudan was not the result of the revolution – it was the deep crisis of Sudanese society that *gave rise* to the revolution.

Had the workers never taken to the streets, would that have halted the economic collapse, when inflation had already soared past 100 per cent in 2018? Would it have prevented the fragmentation of the ruling class, when the dictator had already created two competing armies to secure his grip on power? Would it have kept the regional powers from intervening – the same ones already fuelling destruction in Yemen, Tigray, South Sudan and the DRC?

All of these developments stem from the global, systemic crisis that capitalism has faced since the crash of 2008.

That crisis ushered in a historic era of instability – a period defined by the protracted deadlock between a capitalist class unable to develop the productive forces, and a working class repeatedly betrayed by its own leadership. The world today is defined by organic instability, marked by sharp swings and abrupt upheavals.

Sudan came closer than any recent movement to breaking that deadlock – to establishing a workers' government. In their courage, determination, and resilience, the Sudanese working class could not have done more. What was missing was genuinely revolutionary leadership. Time and again, the movement surrendered to bourgeois and petty-bourgeois illusions.

This failure was not due to the personal shortcomings of individual leaders. It was the inevitable result of lacking a revolutionary party built *in advance* – a party steeled against the pressures of bourgeois society, with trained cadres rooted across the country, capable of uniting the working masses around a coherent revolutionary programme. Without such a party, even the most heroic uprising will bend under the weight of the ruling class.

The failure of the Sudanese revolution opened the floodgates to unimaginable horrors. But Sudan is no exception – it is a warning. The slogan 'Socialism or Barbarism' is not a distant theoretical proposition; it was the real, concrete choice facing Sudan in 2019. In the absence of revolutionary leadership, the outcome was barbarism. This question will be posed again and again.

The old mole of revolution is burrowing – not only across Africa and the Middle East, but also northward, toward the heartlands of imperialism. The tremors that rocked Khartoum in 2019 will, in time, shake the centres of global capitalism.

The only question is: will the forces of revolution be prepared – or will they allow history to be repeated?

The Sudanese revolution offers a trove of lessons. It would be unforgivable to let its legacy pass in vain. The battle between revolution and counter-revolution will erupt again and again, on ever-larger scales. There can be no doubt as to the final victor – *if*, and only if, we prepare in advance. ■

References online at marxist.com/idom-52-references or scan the QR code

LESSONS OF THE PARIS COMMUNE

The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first workers' state in history. For roughly six weeks, from 18 March to 28 May, the workers of Paris ran the city democratically, whilst heroically resisting the onslaught of the old order, based at Versailles.

Marx hailed the Paris workers for "storming heaven", and his analysis of the Commune in *The Civil War in France* remains an essential text. However, notwithstanding the Commune's inspiring achievements, it also had limitations. Of these, arguably the most decisive was its leadership, which came to power almost by accident, and proceeded in a confused and indecisive manner throughout.

In 'Lessons of the Paris Commune', written in 1921, **Leon Trotsky** draws out the limitations of the leadership of the Paris Commune, and explains the importance of a centralised revolutionary party for the victory of the socialist revolution. We encourage readers to read the full article by visiting marxist.com/lessons-paris-commune or by scanning the QR code.

Each time that we study the history of the Commune we see it from a new aspect, thanks to the experience acquired by the later revolutionary struggles and above all by the latest revolutions, not only the Russian but the German and Hungarian revolutions. The Franco-German war was a bloody explosion, harbinger of an immense world slaughter, the Paris Commune a lightning harbinger of a world proletarian revolution.

The Commune shows us the heroism of the working masses, their capacity to unite into a single bloc, their talent to sacrifice themselves in the name of the future. But at the same time it shows us the incapacity of the masses to choose their path, their indecision in the leadership of the movement, their fatal penchant to come to a halt after the first successes, thus permitting the enemy to regain its breath, to reestablish its position.

The Commune came too late. It had all the possibilities of taking the power on 4 September 1870,[1] and that would have permitted the proletariat of Paris to place itself at a single stroke at the head of the workers of the country in their struggle against all the forces of the past, against Bismarck as well as against Thiers.[2] But the power fell into the hands of the democratic praters, the deputies of Paris.

1 Uprising of the Paris workers and the proclamation of the republic, following the defeat and capture of Emperor Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan on 2 September.

2 Head of the reactionary government based at Versailles, which opposed and eventually crushed the Paris Commune.

PETTY-BOURGEOIS LEADERS

The Parisian proletariat had neither a party, nor leaders to whom it would have been closely bound by previous struggles. The petty-bourgeois patriots who thought themselves socialists and sought the support of the workers did not really have any confidence in themselves. They shook the proletariat's faith in itself, they were continually in quest of celebrated lawyers, of journalists, of deputies, whose baggage consisted only of a dozen vaguely revolutionary phrases, in order to entrust them with the leadership of the movement. […]

The workers' party – the real one – is not a machine for parliamentary manoeuvres, it is the accumulated and organised experience of the proletariat. It is only with the aid of the party, which rests upon the whole history of its past,

A barricade in the Paris Commune, 18 March 1871

which foresees theoretically the paths of development, all its stages, and which extracts from it the necessary formula of action, that the proletariat frees itself from the need of always recommencing its history: its hesitations, its lack of decision, its mistakes.

The proletariat of Paris did not have such a party. The bourgeois socialists with whom the Commune swarmed, raised their eyes to heaven, waited for a miracle or else a prophetic word, hesitated, and during that time the masses groped about and lost their heads because of the indecision of some and the fantasy of others.

The result was that the revolution broke out in their very midst, too late, and Paris was encircled. Six months elapsed before the proletariat had reestablished in its memory the lessons of past revolutions, of battles of yore, of the reiterated betrayals of democracy – and it seized power.

These six months proved to be an irreparable loss. If the centralised party of revolutionary action had been found at the head of the proletariat of France in September 1870, the whole history of France and with it the whole history of humanity would have taken another direction.

If the power was found in the hands of the proletariat of Paris on 18 March, it was not because it had been deliberately seized, but because its enemies had quitted Paris.

These latter were losing ground continuously, the workers despised and detested them, the petty bourgeoisie no longer had confidence in them, and the big bourgeoisie feared that they were no longer capable of defending it. The soldiers were hostile to the officers. The government fled Paris in order to concentrate its forces elsewhere. And it was then that the proletariat became master of the situation.

But it understood this fact only on the morrow. The revolution fell upon it unexpectedly.

PASSIVITY

This first success was a new source of passivity. The enemy had fled to Versailles. Wasn't that a victory?

At that moment the governmental band could have been crushed almost without the spilling of blood. In Paris, all the ministers, with Thiers at their head, could have been taken prisoner. Nobody would have raised a hand to defend them. It was not done. There was no organisation of a centralised party, having a rounded view of things and special organs for realising its decisions.

The debris of the infantry did not want to fall back to Versailles. The thread which tied the officers and the soldiers was pretty tenuous. And had there been a directing party center at Paris, it would have incorporated into the retreating armies – since there was the possibility of retreating – a few hundred or even a few dozen devoted workers, and given them the following instructions: enhance the discontent of the soldiers against the officers, profit by the first favorable psychological moment to free the soldiers from their officers and bring them back to Paris to unite with the people.

This could easily have been realised, according to the admissions of Thiers' supporters themselves. Nobody even thought of it. Nor was there anybody to think of it. In the midst of great events, moreover, such decisions can be adopted only by a revolutionary party which looks forward to a revolution, prepares for it, does not lose its head, by a party which is accustomed to having a rounded view and is not afraid to act.

And a party of action is just what the French proletariat did not have.

THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE AND RESPECT FOR 'LEGALITY'

The Central Committee of the National Guard is in effect a Council of Deputies of the armed workers and the petty bourgeoisie. Such a council, elected directly by the masses who have taken the revolutionary road, represents an excellent apparatus of action. But at the same time, and just because of its immediate and elementary connection with the masses who are in the state in which the revolution has found them, it reflects not only all the strong sides but also the weak sides of the masses, and it reflects at first the weak sides still more than it does the strong: it manifests the spirit of indecision, of waiting, the tendency to be inactive after the first successes.

The Central Committee of the National Guard needed to be led. It was indispensable to have an organisation incarnating the political experience of the proletariat and always present – not only in the Central Committee, but in the legions, in the battalion, in the deepest sectors of the French proletariat.

By means of the Councils of Deputies – in the given case they were organs of the National Guard – the party could have been in continual contact with the masses, known their state of mind; its leading center could each day put forward a slogan which, through the medium of the party's militants, would have penetrated into the masses, uniting their thought and their will.

Hardly had the government fallen back to Versailles than the National Guard hastened to unload its responsibility, at the very moment when this responsibility was enormous. The Central Committee imagined 'legal' elections to the Commune. It entered into negotiations with the mayors of Paris in order to cover itself, from the right, with 'legality'.

Had a violent attack been prepared against Versailles at the same time, the negotiations with the mayors would have been a ruse fully justified from the military standpoint and in conformity with the goal. But in reality, these negotiations were being conducted only in order to avert the struggle by some miracle or other. The petty bourgeois radicals and the socialistic idealists, respecting 'legality' and the men who embodied a portion of the 'legal' state – the deputies, the mayors, etc. – hoped at the bottom of their souls that Thiers would halt respectfully before revolutionary Paris the minute the latter covered itself with the 'legal' Commune.

Passivity and indecision were supported in this case by the sacred principle of federation and autonomy. Paris, you see, is only one commune among many other communes. Paris wants to impose nothing upon anyone; it does not struggle for the dictatorship, unless it be for the 'dictatorship of example'.

'COMMUNAL AUTONOMY'

In sum, it was nothing but an attempt to replace the proletarian revolution, which was developing, by a petty-bourgeois reform: communal autonomy. The real revolutionary task consisted of assuring the proletariat the power all over the country. Paris had to serve as its base, its support, its stronghold. And to attain this goal, it was necessary to vanquish Versailles without the loss of time and to send

Execution of Communards at the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, 28 May 1871, drawing by Alfred Darjou

agitators, organisers, and armed forces throughout France. It was necessary to enter into contact with sympathisers, to strengthen the hesitators and to shatter the opposition of the adversary.

Instead of this policy of offensive and aggression which was the only thing that could save the situation, the leaders of Paris attempted to seclude themselves in their communal autonomy: they will not attack the others if the others do not attack them; each town has its sacred right of self-government. This idealistic chatter – of the same gender as mundane anarchism – covered up in reality a cowardice in face of revolutionary action which should have been conducted incessantly up to the very end, for otherwise it should not have been begun.

The hostility to capitalist organisation – a heritage of petty-bourgeois localism and autonomism – is without a doubt the weak side of a certain section of the French proletariat. Autonomy for the districts, for the wards, for the battalions, for the towns, is the supreme guarantee of real activity and individual independence for certain revolutionists. But that is a great mistake which cost the French proletariat dearly.

Under the form of the 'struggle against despotic centralism' and against 'stifling' discipline, a fight takes place for the self-preservation of various groups and sub-groupings of the working class, for their petty interests, with their petty ward leaders and their local oracles.

The entire working class, while preserving its cultural originality and its political nuances, can act methodically and firmly, without remaining in the tow of events, and directing each time its mortal blows against the weak sectors of its enemies, on the condition that at its head, above the wards, the districts, the groups, there is an apparatus which is centralised and bound together by an iron discipline. […]

THE ROLE OF THE PARTY

The party does not create the revolution at will, it does not choose the moment for seizing power as it likes, but it intervenes actively in the events, penetrates at every moment the state of mind of the revolutionary masses and evaluates the power of resistance of the enemy, and thus determines the most favourable moment for decisive action. This is the most difficult side of its task.

The party has no decision that is valid for every case. Needed are a correct theory, an intimate contact with the masses, the comprehension of the situation, a revolutionary perception, a great resoluteness. The more profoundly a revolutionary party penetrates into all the domains of the proletarian struggle, the more unified it is by the unity of goal and discipline, the speedier and better will it arrive at resolving its task.

The difficulty consists in having this organisation of a centralised party, internally welded by an iron discipline, linked intimately with the movement of the masses, with its ebbs and flows. The conquest of power cannot be achieved save on the condition of a powerful revolutionary pressure of the toiling masses. But in this act the element of preparation is entirely inevitable.

The better the party will understand the conjuncture and the moment, the better the bases of resistance will be prepared, the better the force and the roles will be distributed, the surer will be the success and the less victims will it cost. The correlation of a carefully prepared action and a mass movement is the politico-strategical task of the taking of power.

HOW THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION TRIUMPHED

The comparison of 18 March 1871 with 7 November 1917 is very instructive from this point of view. In Paris, there is an absolute lack of initiative for action on the part of the leading revolutionary circles. The proletariat, armed by the bourgeois government, is in reality master of the town, has all the material means of power – cannon and rifles – at its disposal, but it is not aware of it. The bourgeoisie makes an attempt to retake the weapon of the giant: it wants to steal the cannon of the proletariat. The attempt fails. The government flees in panic from Paris to Versailles. The field is clear. But it is only on the morrow that the proletariat understands that it is the master of Paris. The 'leaders' are in the wake of events, they record them when the latter are already accomplished, and they do everything in their power to blunt the revolutionary edge.

In Petrograd, the events developed differently. The party moved firmly, resolutely, to the seizure of power, having its men everywhere, consolidating each position, extending every fissure between the workers and the garrison on the one side and the government on the other. […]

The essential work concerning the preparation, the realisation and the armed insurrection took place openly, and so methodically and naturally that the bourgeoisie, led by Kerensky, did not clearly understand what was taking place under their very eyes. (In Paris, the proletariat understood only on the following day that it had been really victorious – a victory which it had not, moreover, deliberately sought – that it was master of the situation. In Petrograd, it was the contrary. Our party, basing itself on the workers and the garrison, had already seized the power, the bourgeoisie passed a fairly tranquil night and learned only on the following morning that the helm of the country was in the hands of its gravedigger.)

ELECTABILITY AND APPOINTMENTS

The question of the electability of the command was one of the reasons of the conflict between the National Guard and Thiers. Paris refused to accept the command designated by Thiers. Varlin subsequently formulated the demand that the command of the National Guard, from top to bottom, ought to be elected by the National Guardsmen themselves. That is where the Central Committee of the National Guard found its support.

This question must be envisaged from two sides: from the political and the military sides, which are interlinked but which should be distinguished. The political task consisted in purging the National Guard of the counter-revolutionary command. Complete electability was the only means for it, the majority of the National Guard being composed of workers and revolutionary petty bourgeois. And in addition, had the motto 'electability of the command' been extended also to the infantry, Thiers would have been deprived at a single stroke of his essential weapon, the counter-revolutionary officers.

In order to realise this plan, a party organisation, having its men in all the military units, was required. In a word, electability in this case had as its immediate task not to give good commanders to the battalions, but to liberate them from commanders devoted to the bourgeoisie. Electability served as a wedge for splitting the army into two parts, along class lines. Thus did matters occur with it in the period of Kerensky, above all on the eve of October.

But the liberation of the army from the old commanding apparatus inevitably involves the weakening of organisational cohesion and the diminution of combative power. As a rule, the elected command is pretty weak from the technico-military standpoint and with regard to the maintenance of order and of discipline. Thus, at the moment when the army frees itself from the old counter-revolutionary command which oppressed it, the question arises of giving it a revolutionary command capable of fulfilling its mission. And this question can by no means be resolved by simple elections.

Before wide masses of soldiers acquire the experience of well choosing and selecting commanders, the revolution will be beaten by the enemy which is guided in the choice of its command by the experience of centuries. The methods of shapeless democracy (simple electability) must be supplemented and to a certain extent replaced by measures of selection from above.

The revolution must create an organ composed of experienced, reliable organisers, in which one can have absolute confidence, give it full powers to choose, designate and educate the command. If particularism and democratic autonomism are extremely dangerous to the proletarian revolution in general, they are ten times more dangerous to the army. We saw that in the tragic example of the Commune.

The Central Committee of the National Guard drew its authority from democratic electability. At the moment when the Central Committee needed to develop to the maximum its initiative in the offensive, deprived of the leadership of a proletarian party, it lost its head, hastened to transmit its powers to the representatives of the Commune which required a broader democratic basis. And it was a great mistake in that period to play with elections.

But once the elections had been held and the Commune brought together, it was necessary to concentrate everything in the Commune at a single blow and to have it create an organ possessing real power to reorganise the National Guard. This was not the case. By the side of the elected Commune there remained the Central Committee; the elected character of the latter gave it a political authority thanks to which it was able to compete with the Commune. But at the same time that deprived it of the energy and the firmness necessary in the purely military questions which, after the organisation of the Commune, justified its existence.

Electability, democratic methods, are but one of the instruments in the hands of the proletariat and its party. Electability can in no way be a fetish, a remedy for all evils. The methods of electability must be combined with those of appointments. The power of the Commune came from the elected National Guard. But once created, the Commune should have reorganised with a strong hand the National Guard, from top to bottom, given it reliable leaders and established a regime of very strict discipline. The Commune did not do this, being itself deprived of a powerful revolutionary directing center. It too was crushed.

REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

We can thus thumb the whole history of the Commune, page by page, and we will find in it one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed.

More than any other proletariat has the French made sacrifices for the revolution. But also more than any other has it been duped. Many times has the bourgeoisie dazzled it with all the colours of republicanism, of radicalism, of socialism, so as always to fasten upon it the fetters of capitalism. By means of its agents, its lawyers and its journalists, the bourgeoisie has put forward a whole mass of democratic, parliamentary, autonomist formulae which are nothing but impediments on the feet of the proletariat, hampering its forward movement.

The temperament of the French proletariat is a revolutionary lava. But this lava is now covered with the ashes of skepticism resulting from numerous deceptions and disenchantments. Also, the revolutionary proletarians of France must be severer towards their party and unmask more pitilessly any non-conformity between word and action. The French workers have need of an organisation, strong as steel, with leaders controlled by the masses at every new stage of the revolutionary movement.

How much time will history afford us to prepare ourselves? We do not know. For fifty years the French bourgeoisie has retained the power in its hands after having elected the Third Republic on the bones of the Communards. Those fighters of 1871 were not lacking in heroism. What they lacked was clarity in method and a centralised leading organisation. That is why they were vanquished.

Half a century elapsed before the proletariat of France could pose the question of avenging the death of the Communards. But this time, the action will be firmer, more concentrated. The heirs of Thiers will have to pay the historic debt in full. ■

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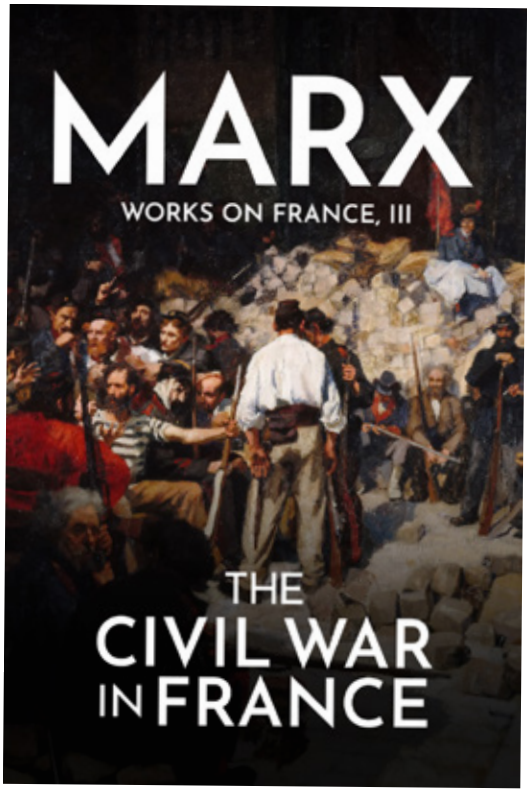


WHEN THE COLOSSUS TREMBLED...

THE MOVEMENT AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR

The movement in the US against the Vietnam War mobilised millions against the government, and became a lightning rod for the demands of a huge layer of the oppressed. In this context, a powerful revolutionary party could have been built to challenge the might of US imperialism from within. In this article, **Tom Trottier** details the rise of the anti-war movement, and how this historic opportunity was missed.

After the Second World War, US imperialism stood as a mighty economic and military power. This 'colossus' was unique. Was there ever an imperialist power that had such wealth and massive firepower, including the atomic bomb? The US military proudly proclaimed that they never lost a war. All this changed with the war on Vietnam.

The US government threw everything it could against the Vietnamese people in order to maintain its imperialist domination. Their actions failed to crush the resolve of the Vietnamese, but they helped to spur a large anti-war movement right in the belly of the beast. The trajectory of the war led to mass radicalisation at home. The stability of US capitalist rule was turned into its opposite.

At its height, the anti-war movement brought millions of people out onto the streets and became a lightning rod for the other mass struggles of the period. There were incredible opportunities to build a large communist party, capable of uniting all of these struggles and giving them a revolutionary leadership. Tragically these opportunities were squandered.

Today, in the context of a rising anti-imperialist mood across the world, revolutionaries have much to learn from a study of the period.

CONTAINMENT

The Second World War firmly cemented the position of the USA as the world's dominant imperialist power. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, having won the war against Nazi Germany, emerged conclusively as a world power. This, combined with the establishment of Stalinist regimes throughout most of Eastern Europe, enormously strengthened the authority of Stalinism in much of the world.

The war also put the question of colonial revolutions firmly on the agenda across much of the globe, with Stalinised communist parties poised to play a leading role. US imperialism tried to implement a policy of 'containment'. They wanted to defeat the colonial revolutions, and stop, or at least limit, the expansion of Stalinism around the world. But the war weariness of the US troops limited the imperialists' options for direct military intervention in the immediate years following the war.

After Japanese imperialism was defeated in 1945, France sought to reclaim its colonies in Indochina, which it did with the backing of the US. Following the Chinese Revolution of 1949 and the Korean War of 1950-53, the American bourgeois talked about the 'domino theory', where supposedly if capitalism were toppled in one country, its neighbours would fall in quick succession. Hence they were determined to prop-up capitalism in Vietnam, which they saw as vital to preserving their interests in the entire region.

From 1945 to 1954, the Vietnamese people, under the Stalinist leadership of Ho Chi Minh, fought and defeated the French, culminating at the Battle of

Rally during the Democratic Convention in Chicago, 1 August 1968 (© Dennis Brack / Alamy)

Dien Bien Phu. After the defeat of the French, the US moved in and created the state of 'South Vietnam'. This set up the context for a war of national liberation against US imperialism and its puppet regime in the south.

The corrupt comprador government in South Vietnam created a choice for US imperialism: abandon Vietnam and watch capitalism get overthrown, or send in the US military to defeat the liberation forces. The imperialists' attempts to prop up capitalism abroad, however, would ultimately destabilise their system at home, with the rise of a mass anti-war movement.

RUMBLING IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The conditions for the development of this movement had been prepared over the previous decades.

For example, there was a profound change in race relations in the aftermath of the Second World War. Having put their lives on the line during the war, many black former soldiers were no longer willing to put up with Jim Crow segregation in the south when they returned home.

In the north, although segregation was not as explicit as in the south, there was in fact a conscious policy of segregation in housing which dictated where people could live. All of this was supplemented with a system of racist murders, which were effectively condoned by the state.

These conditions created an enormous civil rights movement in the 1950s that continued into the 1960s. Black Americans became radicalised over this period. The violence used by the police against the civil rights demonstrators did not defeat the movement, but made it stronger and more widespread.

The civil rights movement helped radicalise a much wider layer of youth in the early 1960s. By mid-April 1960, according to one estimate, some 50,000 students had participated in civil rights sit-ins.[1] Added to this was the development of the Cuban Revolution, and the glaring poverty in the world's richest country. Lots of students were thus becoming politically active, compared with the relative quiet and conformism of the 1950s.

The Students for a Democratic Society, known as SDS, released its 'Port Huron Statement' in 1962. Although it did confront the widespread anti-communism of the cold war, this document was basically a liberal critique of US society, as it did not challenge the capitalist system. Nevertheless, in the political vacuum that existed in the 1960s, the SDS grew explosively.

THE IMPACT OF THE DRAFT

From 1954 to August 1964, the US limited its role in Vietnam to mostly funding, arming, and training its puppet regime in the south. When it became clear in 1964 that the South Vietnamese state was about to collapse, the so-called 'Gulf of Tonkin incident' was used as a pretext to significantly increase the US' military presence and direct intervention.

Many thousands of troops, ships and bombers were sent to Vietnam, eventually reaching 543,000 military personnel in January 1969.[2] US Army General William Westmoreland, a veteran of Korea and the Second World War, was put in charge from 1964 to 1968.

Over 1.8 million Americans were drafted during the course of the war.[3] Since troops were transferred in and out, it was estimated that about 2.7 million US soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen were sent to Vietnam at one time or another.[4]

Clockwise from top-left:

Napalm bombs explode on National Liberation Front (NLF) structures south of Saigon

Execution of NLF Captain Nguyễn Văn Lém, 1 February 1968

NLF prisoners captured during Operation Thayer II

US soldier burning Mỹ Lai, 16 March 1968

I.U.E.
FULL EMPLOYMENT
WE MARCH FOR JOBS FOR ALL NOW!
WE MARCH FOR JOBS FOR ALL NOW!
WE DEMAND VOTING RIGHTS NOW!
END SEGREGATED RULES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
END SEGREGATED RULES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963 – Martin Luther King is pictured in centre

Opposite: Sit-in during the anti-war March on the Pentagon, 21 October 1967

The military draft played an important role in the consciousness of the youth and in developing opposition to the war. Under the guise of 'fighting communism', an entire generation of youth was subject to being forced into the US military to risk being killed or disabled for life in the jungles of Southeast Asia. This was a giant sword of Damocles hanging over young people – and their families.

The class question also created anger against conscription. Whenever there is a military draft, the rules for workers are different to those for the wealthy. College students could defer their military service until after they graduated, resulting in a disproportionate amount of working-class youth being forced into the military. Those with connections to a doctor could be excused for combat on medical grounds.

Race was also a factor. Non-white Americans were disproportionately assigned to combat forces. Blacks and latinos therefore made up a larger proportion of casualties in the war, than their share of the US population at the time.[5]

These tensions were revealed when the US military tried to draft the famous boxer Muhammad Ali in 1967. When Ali resisted, he was arrested, prohibited from boxing, and sentenced to five years in prison. In justifying his decision, Ali explained that:

> "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?
> I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality."

Although Ali was vilified in the media, his action no doubt struck a powerful chord with many young black people being called up to fight. Many soldiers lived in the midst of the discrimination Ali described, and there is no question that the civil rights struggle and the anti-war movement at home appealed to them. Later, these factors would ripen into revolts in the US military itself.

OPPOSITION GROWS

The US Air Force started bombing targets in North Vietnam in February 1965. General Curtis LeMay, who had been involved in US bombing of Japan in the Second World War, proudly boasted that the US could bomb Vietnam "back to the stone age". Indeed, in terms of bomb tonnage, the US dropped more explosive material on Vietnam than all sides dropped in the Second World War combined.[6]

The imperialists unleashed hell on the people of Vietnam, and eventually, Cambodia and Laos. But for the first time in history, the war was televised. The result was that whilst watching the carnage from their living rooms, many American workers and youth asked themselves: why is this happening?

The capitalist television media is a business that sells advertisements. Although they of course portrayed a pro-US line, they also wanted to capture the gritty reality of the war, which certainly is the greatest drama. Television, newspapers and magazines showed graphic and ugly pictures of this war, in a way that had not been done in the past. I can remember being about ten years old and seeing the daily 'body count' reported on the TV news. This was relentless and had an enormous effect on the thinking of the entire population.

The American people were told it was a war 'against communism'. But in the media they saw the reality of old people and children being killed or wounded. Vast regions were subjected to carpet bombing, or the dropping of napalm and the defoliant 'Agent Orange'. Entire villages were burned to the ground by US troops.

Many came to see the insanity of the war when it was reported that a US major, commenting on the Battle of Bến Tre, said: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it". The public were shown how the US would take territory, then abandon it, and then retake it again soon after. What really was being accomplished?

As the war expanded, there was an increase in anti-war activity on many university campuses, including teach-ins on the war. SDS decided to call for an anti-war march in Washington on 17 April 1965. Between 15,000 to 25,000 people attended that demonstration, which was far beyond their expectations.[7]

SDS was not the only radical force that grew, but it was the largest. There were also various peace coalitions organised, which mobilised the mass demonstrations and gathered together many newly politicised youth.

With the growth of the anti-war movement, the leadership of the movement moved to the left politically. Prior to the April 1965 March on Washington, the anti-war movement was led by SANE, a liberal anti-communist group. Now, communists, socialists, pacifists and radical youth would take the lead.

The war dragged on and the US military deployment significantly increased. Dialectically, its opposite also grew: the anti-war movement. Demonstrations in late October 1967 included 300,000 participants in New York City, and another 50,000 in Washington, DC. It was estimated that up to 10 million people were part of the movement during the course of the war.[8]

THE TURNING POINT: THE TET OFFENSIVE

US imperialism needed to completely defeat the national liberation movement. Anything short of that would mean the US had lost. The Vietnamese knew that if they continued to fight, they would win.

President Lyndon B. Johnson counseled patience and advised that victory was around the corner. Throughout 1967 to 30 January 1968, the triumvirate of President Johnson, Secretary of Defence

McNamara and General Westmoreland, kept pushing the line that the Vietnamese communists were 'near defeat'. Ironically, this played into the hands of the communists, who launched the Tet Offensive on 30 January 1968.

Tet is the Vietnamese New Year celebration and a major holiday. Choosing this date for the offensive caught the US imperialists and the South Vietnamese regime by complete surprise. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN – also known as the North Vietnamese Army) and guerrilla units in the South, under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (NLF) simultaneously attacked 100 cities, towns and US military bases, including parts of the Southern capital, Saigon.

On the surface, the Tet Offensive was a failure. In the end, the North Vietnamese and the NLF lost 45,000 soldiers with another 7,000 taken prisoner, without succeeding in maintaining control over any of their targets. More than 14,000 civilians were killed. The US and their Vietnamese allies lost more than 6,000 soldiers, and over 15,000 were wounded.

But these numbers were not the main story. The massive offensive dealt a psychological blow from which US imperialism never recovered. It was shocking to the large section of the American people that had believed Johnson's propaganda. Further, it was clear to all that the Vietnamese died fighting to free their country from the grip of imperialism. What did the US soldiers die for?

General Westmoreland's reaction to Tet was to request another 200,000 troops, to bring the US total to almost 750,000. His request was leaked to the media, which helped give the public the sense that the war was unwinnable, and that the government's previous assertions of a 'near victory' were a lie. Many people, including soldiers, began to see that the vast majority of the Vietnamese population was on the side of the communists, and opposed to the US and its puppet regime. Anticipating the unpopularity of this move, the request was rejected.

The Tet Offensive was therefore the key turning point in the war and a real victory for the communists. The American people began to distrust the government and turn against the war, as did many members of the US military.

1968: A REVOLUTIONARY YEAR

Like the year 1848, 1968 was clearly a year of revolution. The Tet Offensive took place at the beginning of the year, and it sent the message that people can rise up and struggle against their rulers.

In May, students in France moved into the streets, soon to be followed by a general strike of 10 million workers. In Czechoslovakia, the 'Prague Spring' increasingly drew workers into political

action, before it was crushed by Soviet tanks in August. In Mexico from July to October, a mass movement of students erupted, which was put down with violent repression. Pakistan also went through a revolution, which brought down the dictator Ayub Khan.

The United States also experienced upheaval and revolts. Martin Luther King Jr. was the most recognised leader of the civil rights movement. He had come out publicly against the Vietnam War, and was helping to organise workers into unions as part of his 'Poor People's Campaign'.

King also made statements in support of "democratic socialism", signalling that he was contemplating the possibility of publicly opposing the capitalist system. He was under constant surveillance by the FBI, and yet he was assassinated on 4 April 1968.

There were uprisings in over 100 cities when people heard that King was killed, which were brutally repressed by the state. These came less than a year after riots erupted in over 150 locations in response to racism.

The Tet Offensive also created a real split in the ruling Democratic Party. Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy decided to run against President Johnson in 1968 and challenge him for the Democratic Party's nomination based on opposition to the war. McCarthy's campaign really got momentum after Tet, when he did surprisingly well in the February New Hampshire primary. This spurred Senator Robert F. Kennedy to enter the race as an 'anti-war' candidate on 16 March. Shortly after, Johnson announced he would not run for re-election.

Robert Kennedy was later assassinated in June 1968, adding to the turbulence of the year.

In August, a section of the anti-war movement wanted to confront the Democrats at their convention in Chicago. But the mayor of Chicago organised an orgy of police repression to prevent this. The Chicago police and the National Guard brutally attacked the demonstrators with tear gas and truncheons, injuring hundreds. This was broadcast live on TV, whilst the protesters chanted "the whole world is watching".

This shocked a layer of the population. Ron Ferrizzi, a US helicopter crew chief, upon watching the events on the TV in Vietnam, later recalled:

> "At that moment I realised that anyone who really cared for America was sent halfway around the world, chasing some ghost in the jungle, killing somebody else's grandmother, for no reason at all. And in the meantime, my country is being torn apart. I saw someone who looked like my dad, hitting someone who looked like me. Oh my god, whose side would I be on?"[9]

Eventually, eight leaders of the anti-war movement, including Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers, were put on trial. Although five were convicted of 'crossing state lines with intent to incite a riot', their convictions were overturned on appeal.

The Democrats nominated Hubert Humphrey, the vice president under Johnson. But he lost the election to the Republican, Richard Nixon, who promised to end the war, but "with honor".

1969: IMPERIALISM RETREATS

Given all of the above, Nixon knew that he had to withdraw the US military as soon as possible. The government realised they couldn't achieve their objectives with US ground forces, and they needed to curb the growing anti-war movement at home.

They therefore started drawing down troops in mid-1969, with Nixon saying they would replace the US troops with Vietnamese soldiers in a process called 'Vietnamisation'. But although the military draft was reduced, hundreds of thousands of troops were to remain in Vietnam, with their phased withdrawal only scheduled to end in November 1972.

Meanwhile, reports of the US military's massacre of civilians at the hamlet of Mỹ Lai in 1968 were made public in November 1969. At least 347 unnarmed villagers were killed, whilst a number of women and children were raped.

Hearing about war crimes like this, the movement to stop the war continued to grow. Between 500,000 to 750,000 people demonstrated in Washington in November 1969 against Nixon's continuation

of the conflict, in what was then the largest anti-war demo in US history.[10]

In addition to the mass protests, there was a growing amount of draft evasion. There were protests by youth where draft cards were burned. During the course of the war, approximately 570,000 men were classified by the government as 'draft offenders'.[11]

By 1970, the head of a government task force on conscription reported that the number of draft evaders was "expanding at an alarming rate", and that the government was "almost powerless to apprehend and prosecute them".[12]

The left wing of the movement started to draw revolutionary conclusions. Although SDS had started as a left-liberal group in the early 1960s, by now most of its members considered themselves revolutionaries. The 1969 SDS convention had about 1,500 youth present, compared with only 60 in 1962. With now over 100,000 members, it had chapters in many of the colleges and universities throughout the country, and in some high schools.[13]

On top of this, groups like the Black Panthers, the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and other groups on the left were growing. One of these groups was the Young Lords, which was a radical group of Puerto Ricans in NYC and Chicago, who were inspired by and similar to the Black Panthers.

Although both the Black Panthers and the Young Lords were organising on specific issues facing people in the urban neighborhoods (poor housing conditions, child hunger, police brutality), they identified with national liberation movements worldwide, particularly the Vietnamese struggle.

THE SOLDIERS' REVOLT

All of this contributed to the US soldiers' revolt in Vietnam. Already by 1967 some of the discharged soldiers, sailors and marines began to join with other veterans and founded an organisation called Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Earlier draftees might have gone to Vietnam with illusions in what they were doing, but the reality of combat and the horror of the war changed them. The newer soldiers, however, had fewer illusions right from the start. Many came to Vietnam with anti-war feelings already, or at least were sceptical of the perspectives being put forward by the Pentagon.

By mid-1969, when Nixon started troop withdrawals, morale and discipline in the combat units began to completely unravel. The tactic of 'search and destroy' was turned into 'search and avoid'.

The population back home was turning against the war, and many soldiers were asking themselves: What am I dying for? Why should I sacrifice myself? Graffiti in their restrooms expressed the anger against the military high command and the US politicians. Alcoholism and drug abuse was on the increase.

Eventually, from 1969 onwards, some soldiers started 'fragging' officers they deemed too keen for action. If the ranks could not convince their commander to end the 'mission', they would roll a fragmentation grenade into the officer's tent. Historian Richard Gabriel suggested that at least 1,017 officers and NCOs were killed by fragging, and speculated that as many as 20 per cent of the US officers killed in Vietnam may have died at the hands of their own men.[14]

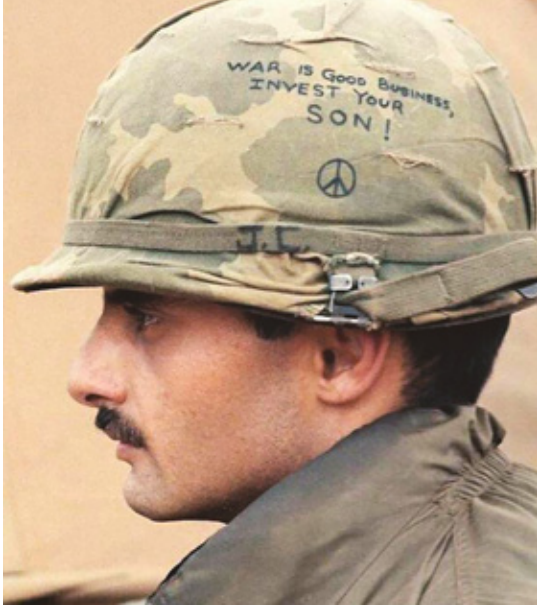
Col. Robert D. Heinl, Jr. a Marine Corps historian, wrote about the breakdown of the US military at that time:

"The morale, discipline and battle-worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States.

By every conceivable indicator, our Army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous.

Elsewhere than Vietnam the situation is nearly as serious…

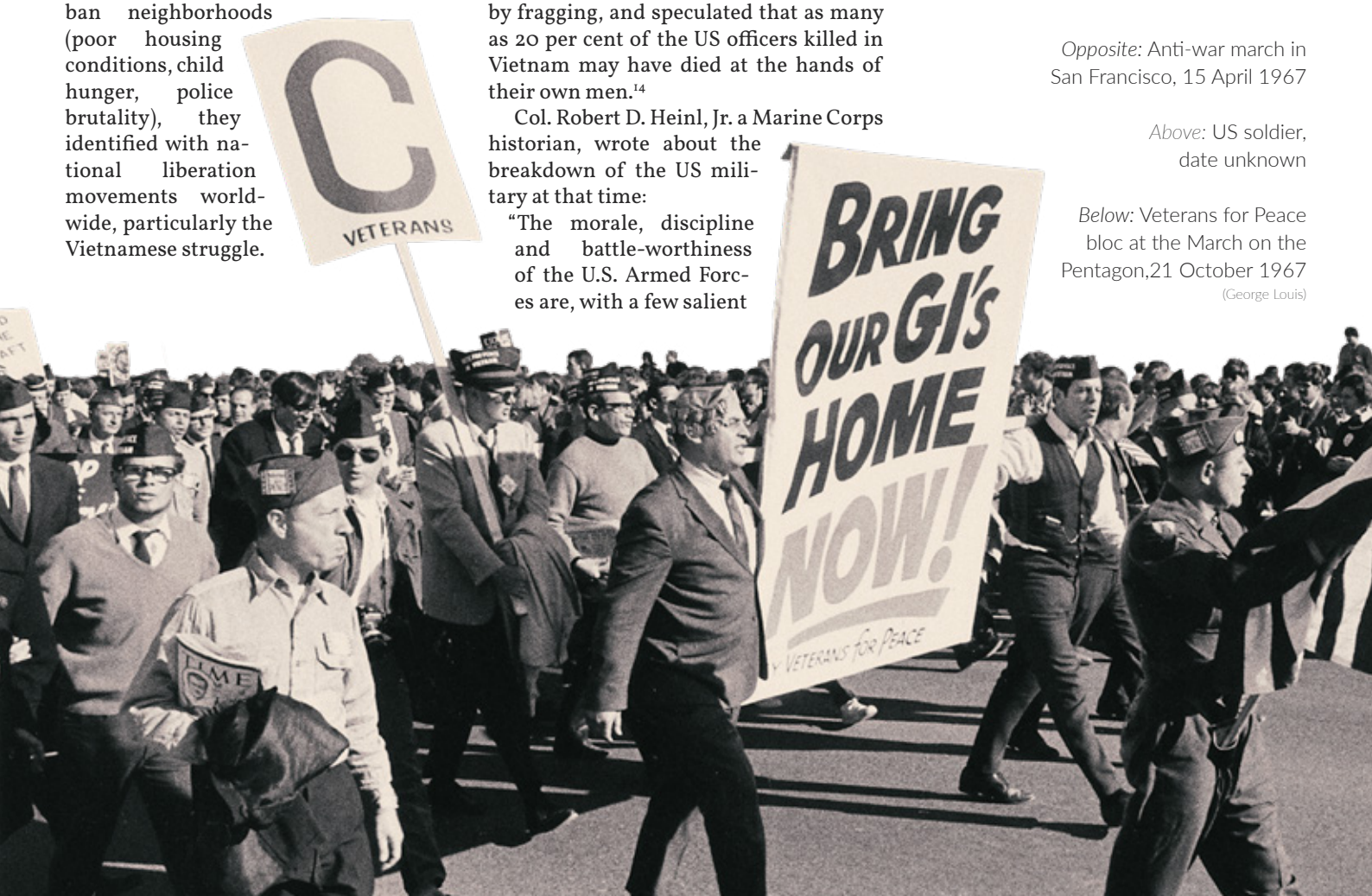
…All the foregoing facts – and many more dire indicators of the worst kind of military trouble – point to widespread conditions among American Forces in Vietnam that have only been exceeded in this century by the French



Opposite: Anti-war march in San Francisco, 15 April 1967

Above: US soldier, date unknown

Below: Veterans for Peace bloc at the March on the Pentagon,21 October 1967 (George Louis)



Teaching Assistants Association strike at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1970

Opposite: Kent State protester Jeffrey Miller shot dead

Army's Nivelle Mutinies of 1917 and the collapse of the Tsarist armies in 1916 and 1917."[15]

LABOUR AND THE WAR

Polling revealed that opposition to the war was prevalent across all ages, and was in fact highest amongst the older generations and the least educated.[16] Nevertheless, the bulk of those participating in the anti-war demonstrations tended to be the youth, and students in particular.

In order for the movement to really strike at the imperialist roots of the war, it was necessary for it to draw in the organised working class. This is since it is ultimately only workers who have the ability to seize the levers of the economy from the capitalists, and bring society to a standstill.

After the purging of the left from the labour movement in the late 1940s and 1950s, the AFL (American Federation of Labour) and CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations) merged into one labour federation. Generally speaking, the union leadership supported the foreign policy of US imperialism and worked hand-in-glove with the CIA.

On 8 May 1970, there was an infamous attack by about 500 'hard hats' in NYC against a demonstration of anti-war students. None of the construction workers who attacked the students were arrested by the police, even though 70 students were injured.

It should be noted that many of the leftist students did not try to put forward their ideas in a way that this layer of the working class would understand. Many of these workers were Second World War veterans, and were angry at seeing the US flag being burned or treated in a disrespectful way.

The NYC Building Trades union organised a demonstration to display 'love and support for the American flag' on 20 May. This had about 50,000 workers, many of whom were required by the unions to be there, and some of whom received extra pay to show up. This episode reinforced the stereotype of the 'conservative American worker'.

There were indeed sections of the working class that were pro-Vietnam War. But polls showed that the less money people earned, the less support there was for the war.[17]

The anger of many union members toward the war did start to have an effect. Soon after the Building Trades' demonstration, about twelve unions in NYC organised a protest *against* the war. This included AFSCME (state, county and municipal workers), distributive workers, hospital workers and the textile workers. Although about 25,000 attended, these workers were not paid to attend, and they did this on their own time.

Previously, on 7 May, the United Auto Workers (UAW) leader Walter Reuther decided to publicly oppose the expansion of the war into Cambodia. Unfortunately, he died in an airplane crash two days later, with some suspecting foul play.[18] The UAW was very significant as it was a large and powerful industrial union, which set the pace on union contracts at the time.

There were many strikes during the Vietnam War, especially compared with today. Federal statistics on major work stoppages show the following: in 1969, there were 412 strikes involving more than 1.5 million workers. In 1970 there were 381 stoppages, involving almost 2.5 million workers. In 1971, there were 298 strikes conducted by *more than* 2.5 million workers. By comparison, in 2023, a recent year in which many workers were on strike, only 35 strikes involving 460,000 workers took place.[19]

These were not political strikes, but economic strikes, mostly over wages. The issue of wages is connected with inflation, as rising prices eat into workers' standard of living.

Inflation had been climbing in the 1960s and early 1970s, with the Vietnam War a big reason for this. One cause of inflation is when the government spends on the military and armaments. The workers in these industries get wages, but they produce no consumer goods or services. This adds to demand in the economy, but not supply. Presidents Johnson and Nixon both wanted to avoid tax increases for an unpopular war, so they resorted to deficit spending for 'guns *and* butter'. Between

January 1963 and January 1971, inflation went up 32 per cent.[20]

FEAR OF REVOLUTION

There is no question that by the early 1970s, many figures in the ruling class and the state apparatus were becoming worried. There was the increase of strikes, and the economic problems that caused them, particularly inflation. On top of this, there was the civil rights movement and the black revolt, the women's movement, and the youth 'counterculture' in general. There were revolts by prisoners and the rise of the American Indian Movement.

The country was reaching a boiling point, while in Vietnam, the morale of the US troops was collapsing. The prominent Marxist, Ted Grant, commented in the summer of 1972:

> "This was the most demoralised army in history. Had there been a strong socialist movement in America, the American capitalists would be facing the socialist revolution under these conditions."[21]

The movement against the war was becoming a focal point that brought all these various struggles together. This is precisely why the ruling class could see this as a danger that threatened their system.

Whilst compelled to withdraw ground troops, Nixon shifted his strategy to the (at first secret) bombing and invasion of Cambodia in 1969-70, and of Laos in 1971. Allegedly this was to stop supplies and reinforcements traveling on the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail', by which Nixon thought he could force North Vietnam to the negotiating table.

This provoked a furious domestic response. Nixon went on television on 30 April 1970 to announce the ground invasion of Cambodia, which set off spontaneous demonstrations over the next few days.

On 4 May, students gathered at Kent State University in Ohio to protest the war. The police claimed the demonstration was 'illegal' and the National Guard were called in. Some National Guard soldiers began to fire their rifles, killing four students and wounding many others.

After Kent State, over 4 million students and others protested in some of the largest and most widespread anti-war protests of the period, involving at least 883 campuses across the country.[22, 23] The killings at Kent State were yet another turning point for the consciousness of millions. The entire premise of the war was supposedly to 'defend democracy'. But here you had students killed and wounded for simply expressing their opposition to the conflict.

Had there been a mass communist party capable of uniting all the struggles of the masses under a socialist programme, the enormous potential of the working class to transform society could have been realised. Tragically, there was no such party established at the time. There was not even the nucleus of such a party.

As a result, the movement began to enter a phase of decline following the dramatic upsurge surrounding the Kent State shootings.

THE MOVEMENT'S EBB

One thing is clear: as the US government began to withdraw substantial amounts of troops from Vietnam, there was a drastic decline in the number of people participating in the anti-war movement.

BRING THE WAR HOME!

OCCUPATION TROOPS OUT OF VIETNAM, LATIN AMERICA, ALL OTHER FOREIGN COUNTRIES, BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES, AND THE SCHOOLS.

CHICAGO, OCT 11

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

new left notes

sds

inside

Above: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) protest at Harvard, 1969 (© AP / J. Walter Green / Alamy)

Left: The SDS' *New Left Notes*, Vol. 4, No. 24, 8 July 1969

Below: Posters by the Student Mobilisation Committee to End the War in Vietnam – left: c. 1969; right: 1971

Opposite, above: Nixon in an SDS paper

The anti-war movement never had a centralised leadership. It was always made up of different wings. There were liberals, pacifists, religious elements and the 'Old Left', as well as the so-called 'New Left'.

The historical failure of both the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party to appeal to the American working class and train the new layers (like the Panthers and the Lords), left a huge vacuum. Thus the petty-bourgeois 'left' moved into this space.

SDS, one of the largest organisations of radicalised youth, was itself an eclectic organisation. Its leadership saw itself as part of the New Left, which rejected the 'Old Left' of the Stalinists, Trotskyists and Social Democrats. It was influenced by the petty-bourgeois academics of the 'Frankfurt School', especially Herbert Marcuse, who argued that the working class was too corrupted by consumer goods and bourgeois propaganda to play any revolutionary role. There was never a serious tendency in SDS that actually studied genuine Marxism, nor did they think to learn from history.

In general, the New Left wrote off the American working class. They saw any revolution as coming from students and other oppressed layers, based on race, sex, age and sexuality. They did not see a reason to build a revolutionary party. They thought that acts of resistance would spur parts of the population to rebellion and revolution. In that sense, they were like the Russian Narodniks of the 1880s, but adapted to 1960s America.

Positioned between the capitalists and the working class, it is in the nature of petty-bourgeois politics to swing from opportunism to ultra-leftism, and back again. With their focus on the 'individual', the petty bourgeois tend to look inwards, resulting in movements dividing themselves, rather than concentrating on what can unite them. They look to gimmicks and 'instant success', rather than taking a longer view. They tend to substitute their own actions – of a small minority – for those of a mass movement. And they refuse, or are unable, to see that the class with both the potential power and the interest to really change society – the working class – is key.

Without a clear theoretical basis to its programme, SDS split apart in 1969. In the end, many of the people from SDS went into the numerous groups that made up the 1970s sectarian left.

The Black Panthers and the Young Lords broke apart due to vicious state repression, coupled with their own internal weaknesses. These parties started with a few people and grew quickly. The leadership was improvised and included an eclectic mix of ideas. Some of their activity was about party building, whilst some involved running social-service programmes like providing free breakfasts to children in the neighbourhoods. Inevitably, disagreements developed. These were not handled in a way to organise discussions to raise the theoretical level of the membership, and therefore led to demoralising fights and splits.

The anti-war movement itself was mostly organised as a 'one-issue' coalition. Much of this stemmed from the leaders' analysis of the war. Did they see the war as the necessary result of imperialism? Or were they, like many liberals, only against the war because the US was losing it?

The movement only made ties with the organised working class in its last few years, but even then the working class was not its leading force. Some of that can be blamed on the union leaders. But there was no real concerted effort by the anti-war movement's leaders to appeal to rank-and-file workers, to support union strikes, and tie the issues together, especially on the question of inflation.

Although it was the working-class youth that did the bulk of the fighting in Vietnam, the New Left remained hostile toward the working class, thus severely restricting the movement.

FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

A ceasefire took effect on 28 January 1973, by which point nearly all the US combat troops had been withdrawn. Following this, the South Vietnamese comparador regime continued to lose support, until it collapsed in 1975.

The scenes of the helicopters on the roof of the US embassy and the pictures of the helicopters and other equipment being thrown into the ocean off US aircraft carriers made it clear that the mighty colossus of US imperialism had suffered a major defeat. It was a remarkable moment in history, which had a profound impact on society in general, shaking many illusions that the population had in the ruling institutions.

The final stage of the Vietnam War coincided with the end of the post-war boom. With the worldwide crisis of capitalism hitting in 1973, American workers were now going to experience the capitalist class attacking their wages, benefits and working conditions, for decades to come.

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If there had been revolutionary leadership, the movement against the Vietnam War would have linked up with the working class and the civil rights movement and helped to forge a real workers' party. As both the war and the movement came to an end, revolutionary leadership could have re-directed the struggle to the battle for jobs, and against giving concessions to the bosses. It is therefore necessary to consider why such a leadership never emerged.

The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) was the largest group on the American Left from the early 1920s. In 1928, Stalinism took hold of the party. Under Stalinist leadership, it adopted opportunist politics for the most part from 1936 onward. The party lost many of its members in 1956 because of two events: the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which was suppressed with Soviet troops; and Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's reign of terror.

In the 1960s, the CPUSA played a lamentable role in terms of the anti-war movement. They continued to tail-end the Democrats – at least the 'anti-war' Democrats. They did not call for US troops to be removed at once, but for the US Government to negotiate with the Vietnamese.

The main alternative to the Stalinist CPUSA was the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP). After Trotsky was exiled from the USSR in the late 1920s, he tried his best to educate a new layer of Marxist cadres. During this period, there was no section of the International Left Opposition (and later the Fourth International) that received more help from Trotsky than the American section, which founded the SWP in 1938.

The leading American cadres however, were never able to grasp the dialectical method of Marxism, and apply it to their analysis of perspectives and party building. After Trotsky was assassinated in 1940, there was nobody that the leadership would listen to who could guide them on the correct path when they made mistakes.

The mechanical and ultimately non-Marxist approach of the SWP led them to miss opportunities during and after the Second World War. The postwar period was certainly a tough period for the revolutionary left in all the advanced capitalist countries, but especially in America. The task was to educate cadres, and then take advantage of new openings which would eventually come their way, as they clearly did in the 1960s with the civil rights and anti-war movements. The SWP did take advantage of these opportunities to some extent, but lacking the necessary theoretical compass, they bent in an opportunist direction.

BUILDING THE MOVEMENT OR A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY?

The SWP's strategy towards the Vietnam War was basically built on looking for shortcuts to build their party, and accepting a reformist approach towards the war. The SWP completely abandoned a sense of proportion. Its leaders saw the party's role as building the anti-war movement to a point large enough that it could supposedly force the withdrawal of the US military. Apparently, after this stage, they could then take up the struggle for socialism.

It seems they assumed that the building of the party would be an automatic result of this successful movement. Their emphasis was on building the movement, not building the party and training Marxist cadres. The 'training' that the new members were getting was simply in how to build big demonstrations.

The SWP was the dominant force in the Student Mobilisation Committee to End the War in Vietnam, especially since 1967. This committee organised many local and national demonstrations. The problem is that the main push was to get as many people to the demonstrations, using the common denominator of 'Out Now'.

SWP leader Fred Halstead justified their approach in his book, *Out Now*:

> "*The SWP upheld the autonomy of the anti-war movement as a mass force.* […] *The movement was a united front of a special type,* not between mass organisations of the working class for a concrete set of demands, but between diverse and multiclass elements whose sole bond of unity was to oppose the war. *It had to confine itself to implementing actions around that central purpose in order to hold together."*[24] (Our emphasis)

But whilst its members ran around to get large turnouts on demonstrations, who

from the party was making the political arguments against capitalism in general? Namely, that even if the war ended, unless the working class took power, US imperialism would still exist and there would be more such wars. And that in order for the workers to come to power, they need a party, and this party must be built.

Although the SWP leadership might have said that they agree with all of this, it was not how they trained and deployed their people. The reason for this is if too many comrades made the case for a workers' struggle against imperialism, it would have worked against the multi-class coalition – this 'united front of a special type' – by pushing away the pro-capitalist elements.

This whole approach shows how powerful pragmatism and empiricism was in the SWP leadership. They wanted to focus on the here and now: stop the war. The major focus, however, should have been on how to best *build the party*, and to win over a larger section of the movement to a revolutionary perspective and programme.

Along with this opportunism, the SWP had a sectarian approach toward SDS. Why would communists not enter SDS when it was growing? Why not try and win over some of these radicalised students? The SDS was wide open with youth looking for answers. Indeed, the Maoist sectarian group, the Progressive Labour Party, ended up winning many of these students. But given the inability of their programme to connect with workers in the USA, the potential of these students was wasted.

The SWP grew from their intervention in the movement against the Vietnam War, but the basis of recruitment was quite low. In the end, what was achieved? In 1959, the SWP had about 600 members in 12 different cities, with approximately 100 each in NYC and Los Angeles.[25] In 1977, eighteen years later, they had about 1,760 members in more than 50 cities, with 2,000 in their youth organisation, some of whom were members of the party, with others as periphery.[26] This was the high point for the SWP.

Had they taken a different approach, the SWP might have grown even larger, given the opportunities that emerged. Shortly after 1977, the SWP went into a period of stagnation, and then a period of sharp decline with a spiral of splits and expulsions.

What is clear is that they built the party primarily on mobilising to stop the war, and did not properly educate its new members as Marxist cadres. The SWP published many books, but there were no major efforts to make sure the recruits or older members actually read them. We can see this in how quickly the SWP fell apart in the early 1980s.

THE TASK OF COMMUNISTS

In a broad movement such as an anti-war movement, it is clear that there are various political groupings representing different classes and layers in society. The role of Marxists is to intervene in such movements and connect them to the working class. It is also to bring the issues of the war to the working class. The method of intervention is to shine a light on the root causes of war, and explain that it is only the working class in power that can lead to a socialist world, which is the only basis for lasting peace.

Once the split with President Johnson began in 1968, the anti-war Democrats tried to co-opt the movement. Communists should have put forward the demand that the anti-war movement should not fall for that trap, and that it should run candidates independently. The movement should have called on the trade unions to break from the Democrats and build a labour party. Even if a wing of the anti-war movement did not agree to this, such an approach would have opened up more support for the communists and helped connect the movement with the working class.

It was clear that SDS gained the largest share of radicalised youth, many of whom were looking for a way forward and open to the ideas of revolutionary communism. It was not a question of winning over the entire SDS, but of recruiting the best elements.

It was absolutely correct for communists to participate in the anti-war movement and to help build it. However, this needed to be done without watering down their ideas or hiding their banner. Revolutionary consciousness does not develop in a linear manner; under certain conditions, it can catch up with a bang. Putting forward the ideas in a clear and bold way can gain much more than if done so in a hesitant, half-hearted fashion.

A correct approach by a small number of genuine Marxists in 1964 and after could have created a much larger force with which to build a mass communist party in the US today. Ultimately, however, the SWP was not in a politically healthy condition to be able to do this.

OUR TASKS TODAY

We cannot just copy and paste from history onto the conditions of today, but we can learn lessons from the past and skilfully adapt them to today's conditions.

The bourgeoisie have learned lessons from the experience of Vietnam. They removed military conscription in 1973, and never brought it back, even during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have understood that if they did this it could lead to a repeat of 1965 to 1972, but on a much higher level.

Wars will continue, so long as capitalism exists. Inevitably, some of these will produce mass anti-war movements, as Israel's genocide against the Palestinians has shown. Communists link the oppression of the Palestinians to capitalism and US imperialism. The path of their liberation is along the road of the world socialist revolution.

The most serious of these youths have started to draw revolutionary conclusions, and we should expect larger layers to look toward communist ideas. Communists who learn the lessons of the past will be more prepared to gain from these present and future opportunities to build the party into a mass force which can lead the working class to victory worldwide. ■

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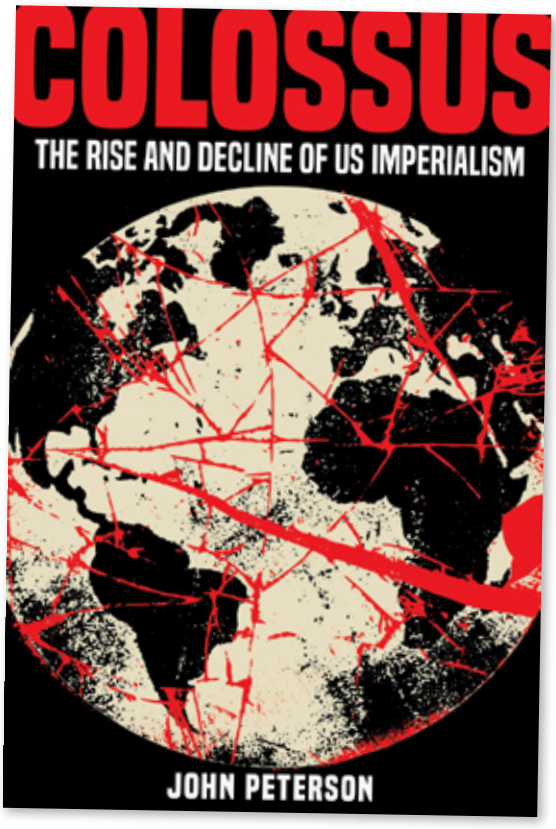
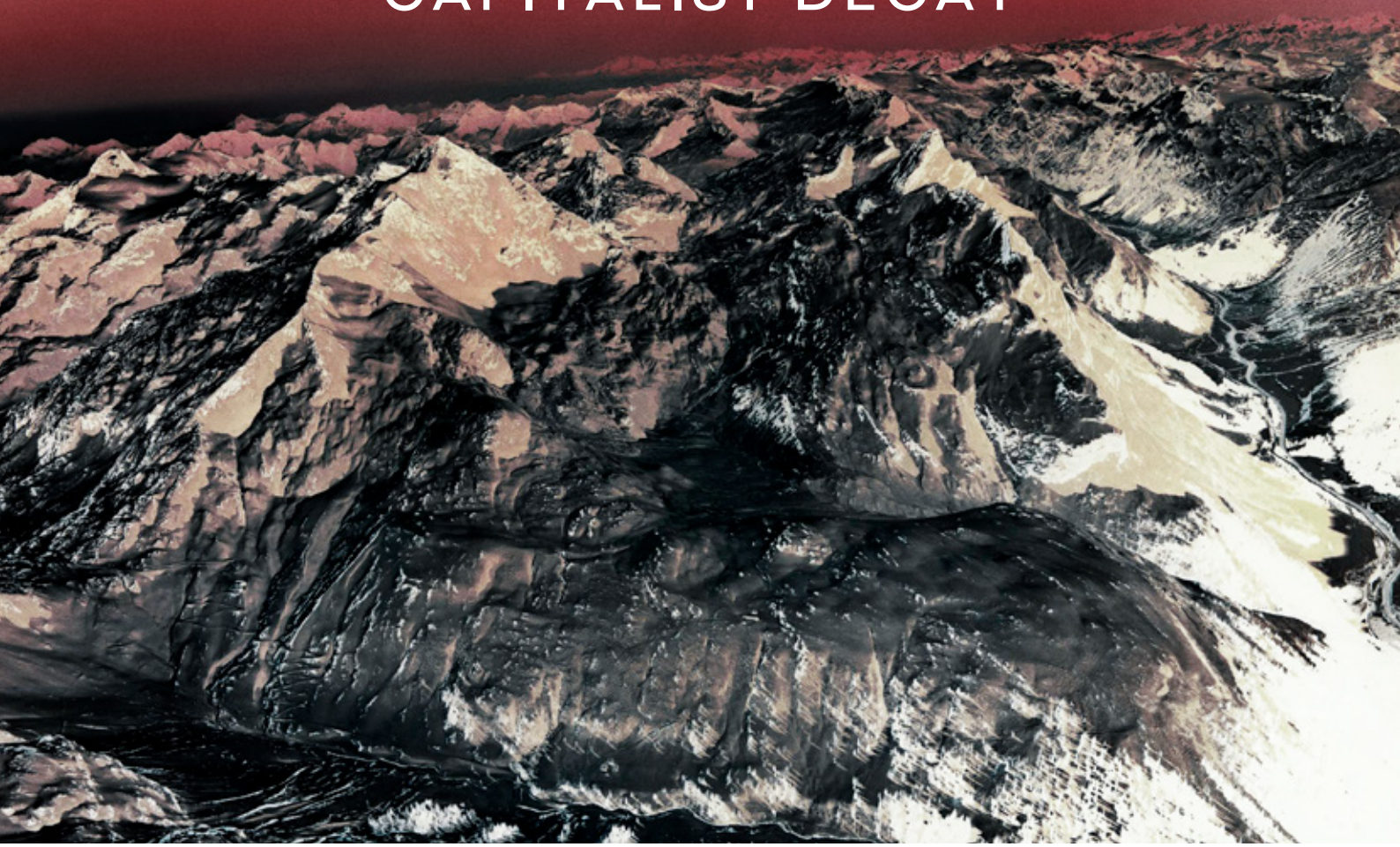


THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN

A PORTRAIT OF CAPITALIST DECAY



Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* brilliantly encapsulates the impotence of the bourgeoisie to further take society forward. This review by **Daniel Morley** explores how the barbarism of the First World War profoundly shook Mann's outlook, and how his book astutely captures the decadence of a class that has outlived its historic function.

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* is a masterpiece of twentieth century literature. It is a book that encapsulates the crisis of the bourgeoisie in its period of decline.

Through its cast of characters and setting in the Swiss mountains, the book expresses the impotence and confusion of the German and European bourgeoisie and the dead end of their social system. Although the book is written in a largely realist style, the setting and events have a subtly surreal quality to them, which serves to convey the sense of a class living on borrowed time.

The story follows the thoroughly average bourgeois graduate, Hans Castorp, as he visits his cousin in a luxury tuberculosis sanatorium in Davos. Intending only to stay for three weeks, Hans is sucked into the sanatorium's inescapable orbit, with its 'horizontal', pampered way of life. The novel covers the seven strange years of his stay, and the political, scientific and sexual things he learns in that time.

THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Mann started writing the book in 1912, before the outbreak of the First World War, after he visited his sister in the very sanatorium in which the book is set. Whilst there, just like the novel's protagonist, he was examined by a doctor who supposedly saw some imperfection in Mann's lungs, and recommended a stay of several months. Although he managed to avoid the lethargic allure of this place, the possibility of abandoning himself to it stuck with him.

Mann was a highly cultured member of the German bourgeoisie, and his books expressed the contradictions and crises this class went through in the early twentieth century. He was steeped in the bourgeoisie's problems, its anxieties, its soul. He understood deeply its psyche in this age of revolution and counter-revolution, in particular its indecisiveness, its split into the warring factions of liberal-progressives and arch reactionaries.

At the onset of the war, Mann originally shared in his class's growing mood of irrationalism and pessimism. His favourite philosophers were Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who both promoted an elitist individualism, and the latter believed in the need for the elites to dominate the world. He had thus been an avid supporter of Germany's entry into the First World

Edited photograph of the Monte Rosa massif, Lepontine Alps, Switzerland

Above: Thomas Mann, illustration by Samuel Johnson Woolf, 1934

Below: *Image of the Future from the 'Gas War'* (1916), Rudolf Eberle

Opposite: Schatzalp, the sanatorium in Davos at which Mann stayed, and the setting of *The Magic Mountain*
(ETH Library Zurich, Image Archive / LBS_H1-011619)

War, which he saw as a way for Germans to absorb themselves in their own culture.

The horrors of the war, however, forced him to change his worldview. He became deeply preoccupied with the dangers of Nietzschean irrationalism and its philosophy of aristocratic domination. He instead looked to reason and science to lead humanity to a more just future. As a result, the book was revised and enlarged into an epic tale, enriched by this crisis of German and European society that the war represented.

This is also why Mann wrote *The Magic Mountain* as a tragedy. The book has death and disease as consistent themes, and has an introspective, slow-motion, dreamlike quality. Taken as a whole, it has an atmosphere of impotence, somewhat like a dream in which one is fighting, but cannot throw a punch, as if submerged in water.

SICKNESS OF THE SYSTEM

When Hans arrives, he is new to this world. He is from the 'flat-lands', as the guests refer to non-patients, much like pirates supposedly refer to everyone else as 'land-lubbers'. In the space of a week or two, he is introduced to a wealth of characters and the features and rituals of life in this sanatorium. He learns strange things, such as that up here:

> "… disease is a mark of honour, a confirmation [for the patients] of their élite status. Spurred on by the sanatorium's director, Dr. Behrens, they are proud of their sickness and talk of the ability to acquire it as a 'talent'."[1]

Mann was preoccupied with what he saw as a dangerous fetishisation of disease, death and the idealised past in European culture at the time. The setting of this exclusive sanatorium packed with rich hypochondriacs is a stroke of genius, because it brings out that atmosphere of decay that pervades capitalism at its highest stage of development.

The decades leading up to the First World War were known in Europe as the Belle Époque (the 'beautiful age'). In these decades Europe boomed and became more integrated, and there was an unprecedented peace and stability. But this boom simply laid the basis for the imperialist crisis that reached its culmination in the catastrophe of the First World War.

For a bourgeois such as Mann, this meant the Europe of the Belle Époque appeared in hindsight not to have achieved great things, but to have sleepwalked to disaster. To paraphrase Marx, there are decades where nothing happens; and there are days where decades happen. If in the four years of the First World War, many decades worth of events were compressed, then the decades preceding it were like mere days.

In exactly this way, the confusing, topsy-turvy subjective experience of time forms a key theme in this book. The

sleepiness of the sanatorium represents Europe as a whole in the decades leading up to the First World War.

His influx of new experiences in a short space of time leads Hans to feel as though he has been up there for an age, when it has only been a week or two. Mann philosophises on how, although it is widely understood that excitement makes time fly, it also appears to stretch it out, since it is so full of events. In this isolated resort, these sickly bourgeois individuals waste their remaining days away, flirting and gossiping as the years literally pass by:

> "Waiting means hurrying on ahead, it means regarding time and the present moment not as a boon, but an obstruction; it means making their actual content null and void, by mentally overleaping them. Waiting, we say, is long. We might just as well – or more accurately – say it is short, since it consumes whole spaces of time without our living them or making any use of them as such. We may compare him who lives on expectation to a greedy man, whose digestive apparatus works through quantities of food without converting it into anything of value or nourishment".[2]

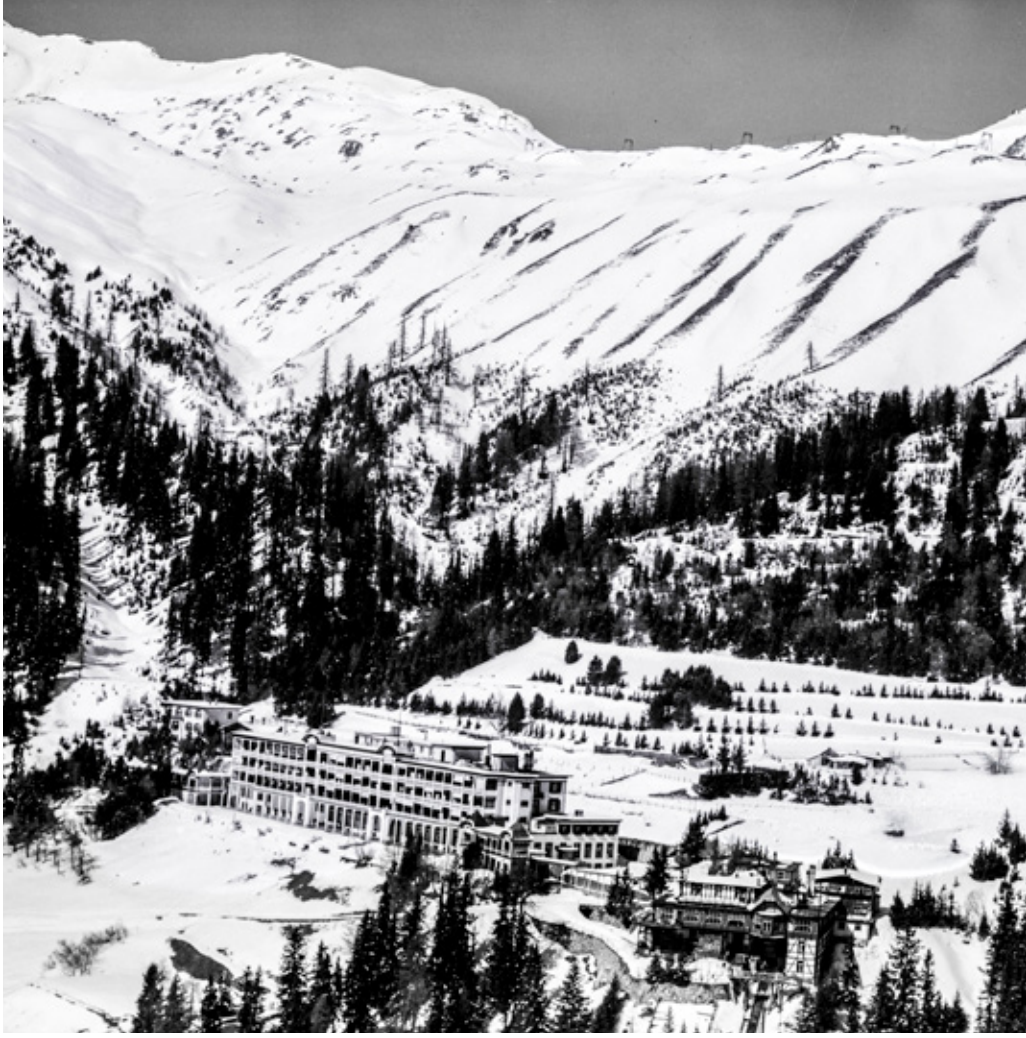
In this coddled atmosphere, a decadent and over-ironic or cynical attitude engulfs the patients, as the character Settembrini, who represents the last of Europe's progressive bourgeois, warns Hans:

> "Guard yourself from the sort of irony that thrives up here […] it makes for depravity, it becomes a drawback to civilisation, an unclean traffic with the forces of reaction".[3]

It is, therefore, a highly symbolic book that captures the problems of its age, at least from the bourgeois point of view. The barbarism of the First World War revealed undeniably the dead end of bourgeois society, and Mann could see the intellectual rot setting in.

It was Mann's genius to perceive the depth and significance of this trend early in the twentieth century, and to choose a setting and plot so appropriate for bringing it out in a plausible way, especially through the indecisiveness of his characters. As he explains at the book's beginning:

> "A man lives not only his personal life, as an individual, but also, consciously or unconsciously, the life of his epoch and his contemporaries […] if the life about him, if his own time seem, however outwardly stimulating, to be at bottom empty of such food for his aspiration; if he privately recognise it to be hopeless, viewless, helpless, opposing only a hollow silence to all the questions man puts […] then, in such a case, a certain laming of the personality is bound to occur".[4]



DEAD END OF THE BOURGEOISIE

Although the book is about ideas, it draws the reader in as a '*Bildungsroman*', which is a story of personal development, or coming of age. In this way, we are emotionally invested in Hans' experience and share his perspective as an outsider to this strange environment. His personal journey is also an odyssey into the ideas and problems of the European bourgeoisie at what appears to be a crossroads, but is really a dead end.

A key point in the novel is the romantic infatuation Hans develops for a Russian woman called Clavdia. We are introduced to her indirectly – Hans is annoyed at the sound of the door to the lunchroom being slammed by her. Mann expertly describes Hans' fixation at her annoying mannerisms, somehow managing to convey to the reader that this is a sign he is in love with her (or rather, with his idea of her), and not that he dislikes her.

Hans' 'romance' with Clavdia is all titillation, anticipation and anxiety. He sustains a high for a week purely on account of the fact she passed him in the corridor in such a way, and at such an unusual time, that Hans has reason to believe she may have done so deliberately, just to see him.

The reader is both amused and also emotionally sucked into this game of romantic hide and seek. Hans' game with Clavdia is typical of the sanatorium's general bourgeois obsession with gossip, status and form, and its atmosphere of awkward politeness. Mann skewers with great irony these bored, anxious individuals, these vapid fools trying to interest one another in themselves with stolen glances.

Just as Goncharov's *Oblomov* depicted the indolence of the Russian aristocracy in the nineteenth century, Hans' inability to actually make a move with Clavdia reflects the impotence and indecision of the European bourgeois of the twentieth.

IRRATIONALITY

The mood of pessimism and cynicism (or 'laming of the personality') common to the bourgeoisie in its period of decline, tended to foster the growth of religious mysticism and other irrational ideas, the most extreme example of which was Nazism and its fantasies about northern European paganism.

This produced strange paradoxes, as mysticism sat side by side with the increasingly advanced and complex discoveries of science and technology. Science had become too advanced for most people to understand, and had its own procedures that to many would have seemed magical. This blending of the real and surreal was a prominent theme in the 'modernist' literature of the time, of which Mann's *Magic Mountain* is considered a classic.

At one point Hans has his X-ray taken, a process which involves mystifying procedures, a darkened room and flashes of

electricity, followed by the uncanny sight of his own innards being displayed to him in real time. The X-ray takes on a deeply emotional, almost spiritual significance for Hans, and the captured image is at one point associated with a séance, the implication being that for ordinary people like him, such technology is like occult magic. The impression is of individuals confused by the technology they end up relying on, as the important character Naphta points out to Hans:

> "Aviators, flying men, he said, were mostly a bad lot, untrustworthy, above all exceedingly superstitious. They carried mascots on board with them [...] they spat three times in different directions, they wore the gloves of lucky flyers. How could such primitive unreason be reconciled with the conception of the universe which underlay their calling?"[5]

The fact that Hans' visit, initially just for three weeks, morphs into a seven-year stay, embodies this contradiction. His stay is extended after the doctor finds a 'moist patch' in his lungs, and his temperature rises to the grey area just between healthy and feverish.

Hans' diagnosis is never actually spelled out. At one point a thermometer without temperature markings is used on him, which leaves the doctor at liberty to declare the temperature whatever he wants it to be. Of course, the doctors of this private hospital have a vested interest in using their mastery of science to lengthen each patient's stay. This all contributes to the subtly surreal atmosphere, in which one can never be quite sure what is objectively true, and in which even the rich patients have no real understanding or control of their circumstances.

This dilemma, this bourgeois anxiety over science and truth, is then dramatised in the fierce arguments between Settembrini, who believes fervently in reason and the ability of bourgeois republics to gradually liberate mankind, and Naphta, a Jesuit obscurantist opposed to science.

Settembrini warns against the romanticisation of disease and death as somehow dignified, and argues in favour of the use of science to abolish as much human suffering as possible. In response, Naphta rubbishes science as 'just another belief':

> "My good sir, there is no such thing as pure knowledge [...] Faith is the vehicle of knowledge, intellect secondary. Your pure science is a myth. A belief, a given conception of the universe, an idea – in short, a will, is always in existence."[6]

He asks whether "the atom, that pretty mathematical joke of the smallest, the indivisible particle of matter – its existence has been demonstrated, undoubtedly?"[7] In this statement Naphta was echoing prominent scientists of the time, such as Ernst Mach, who denied the existence not only of the atom, but that of objective truth altogether.

Poking fun at the outlandish claims about the size of the universe, he tells Hans that "the simplicity of a child, who thinks the stars are holes in the tent of heaven, through which the eternal brightness shines",[8] is just as worthy of belief as the talk of vast balls of flame lightyears away, which we are expected to believe just because a scientist told us. In this, Naphta sounds just like any celebrated postmodernist intellectual from our time. Indeed, both reflect the mysticism and pessimism of bourgeois philosophy in its period of decline.

As negative and frightening as Naphta is, Settembrini struggles to convince Hans against him, because his enlightenment liberalism has become so sterile, abstract and one-sided. His outdated belief in the republican nation state as a rational institution and guarantor of freedom is particularly unconvincing in the age of colonialism and the eve of the First World War. Settembrini cannot counter Naphta's attacks on the hypocrisy of the

Isle of the Dead (Version 3) (1883), Arnold Böcklin

nation state. The bourgeoisie is incapable of defending science and reason, because they base themselves on an irrational and unjust system.

Naphta's reactionary arguments against liberalism are convincing because they have more than a grain of truth to them, which has always been the case for those reactionaries who rail against the modern world. Naphta's character is defined by his love for suffering, punishment, and rejection of reason and progress, so his Jesuitism is fitting. He is also, however, supposedly a 'communist', and does occasionally go on rants about the need to destroy the bourgeois world and bring enormous terror and suffering to the bourgeoisie.

It is clear that this 'communism' is merely a form of his extreme radicalism, his penchant for violent retribution. Although it is not a truthful depiction of communism, it is an authentic depiction of the bourgeois perspective of communism and of revolution: irrational violence and envy that threaten to derail capitalism's gradual march of progress.

In this respect, Mann is guilty of something of a 'horseshoe theory' outlook, i.e. identifying communism and extreme reaction as more or less the same, with liberalism at the other pole. Nevertheless, Naphta does remain as a very effective depiction of the obscurantist tendencies nurtured by the dead end of capitalism.

SNOW

Settembrini sees himself as a classic bourgeois citizen, a partisan in the fight for enlightenment, but in reality he does nothing. He has written one article in his entire life. All he does is produce hot air in his struggles with Naphta over Hans' bourgeois soul.

And this struggle, so symbolic of the crossroads capitalist society stood (and still stands) at, is one that is too great for average Hans. He prefers to while away his years in sleepy Davos. His indecision, increasing introspectiveness, and his romanticisation of death, are typical of the bourgeoisie then and now, incapable as they are of solving their own system's problems. As Hans rather pathetically sums up the ideological confusion of his class, "what a mix-up!"[9]

Unable to express himself socially and emotionally, he begins to seek adventure in the isolation of the mountains surrounding the sanatorium. The bracing winds of the mountains are an escape from the controlled luxury of the sanatorium.

Hans' increasingly risky excursions here also serve to express the theme of the wild destructiveness of the imperialist bourgeoisie, its death wish. Unable to lead society forward, all it can do is drag humanity into barbarism.

The chapter 'Snow', arguably the most pivotal in the book, is truly terrifying. It brilliantly captures the sublime power of natural forces and the rapidity with which they can overwhelm puny humans, the awe that the sight of layer after layer of barren, vast mountains inspires. Hans' risky behaviour on these mountains reminds one of that strange, irrational desire to leap off high ledges.

Whereas in the controlled confines of the sanatorium, Hans is timid and guilty of over-thinking things, in the isolation of the mountains he is brave, even foolhardy. Like in the sanatorium, he is drawn to death.

However, the stark, brutal reality that awaits Hans in the mountains suddenly terrifies him. After passing out and having disturbing dreams, Hans emerges with a new outlook, concluding:

> *"… because of charity and love, man should never allow death to rule one's thoughts."*[10]

This evidently reflects Mann's own horror and 'reawakening' during the First World War, and the fact that these are the only italicised words in the entire book strongly indicate that Mann was here communicating his own beliefs: the rejection of both revolution and reaction, which to Mann both 'allow death to rule one's thoughts'.

It is worth noting that Mann finished writing this chapter in June 1923, when Germany was gripped by a revolutionary crisis. This crisis would culminate in a botched Communist uprising in October of the same year, followed by Hitler's 'Beer Hall Putsch' in November. Clearly, the anxiety of the German bourgeoisie, caught between the fascists on one hand and the prospect of socialist revolution on the other, is faithfully reflected in Mann's own ideas.

Mann's own hope that the newly established Weimar Republic would allow for the victory of 'charity and love' proved to be illusory. The victory of the Nazis in 1933 completed the German bourgeoisie's descent into irrationalism, barbarism and death. Nevertheless, Mann's honest and penetrating search for a way forward for European bourgeois culture would only highlight the absence of such a way forward.

DECADENCE

It is this honesty that makes *The Magic Mountain* such a masterpiece. Despite the symbolic nature of the characters, they do not come across as "mere shadow figures and walking parables",[11] as Mann himself worried they might be. The reader is at once aware of their symbolism and yet drawn into their emotional life. As Engels said of Minna Kautsky's novel, "each of them is a type but at the same time also a definite individual, a 'Dieser [This]', as old Hegel would say, and that is how it should be".[12]

Throughout the novel Mann demonstrates his complete mastery of the written word, seamlessly combining precise and realistic description with powerful symbolism and magical imagery. But the pleasure of reading this book lies chiefly in the scope of its ideas. There is no escaping that this is a deeply philosophical novel. And that is precisely what makes it great. Mann's writing is too rich, ironic, funny and profound for the reader to lose interest due to its strongly philosophical and symbolic nature.

To this day, perhaps more than ever, the bourgeoisie is split between on the one hand, liberalism – supposedly progressive – and on the other hand, irrationalism and the denial of progress. It is still sleepwalking to disaster, impotent before its own crises.

The Magic Mountain therefore reveals the languid, decadent state of the bourgeoisie, which is no passing fad, but has festered away for over a century now. It is a window into the mindset of a redundant and reactionary class that must be overthrown before progress can once again be made, and science rationally deployed in the cause of the emancipation of mankind. ■

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